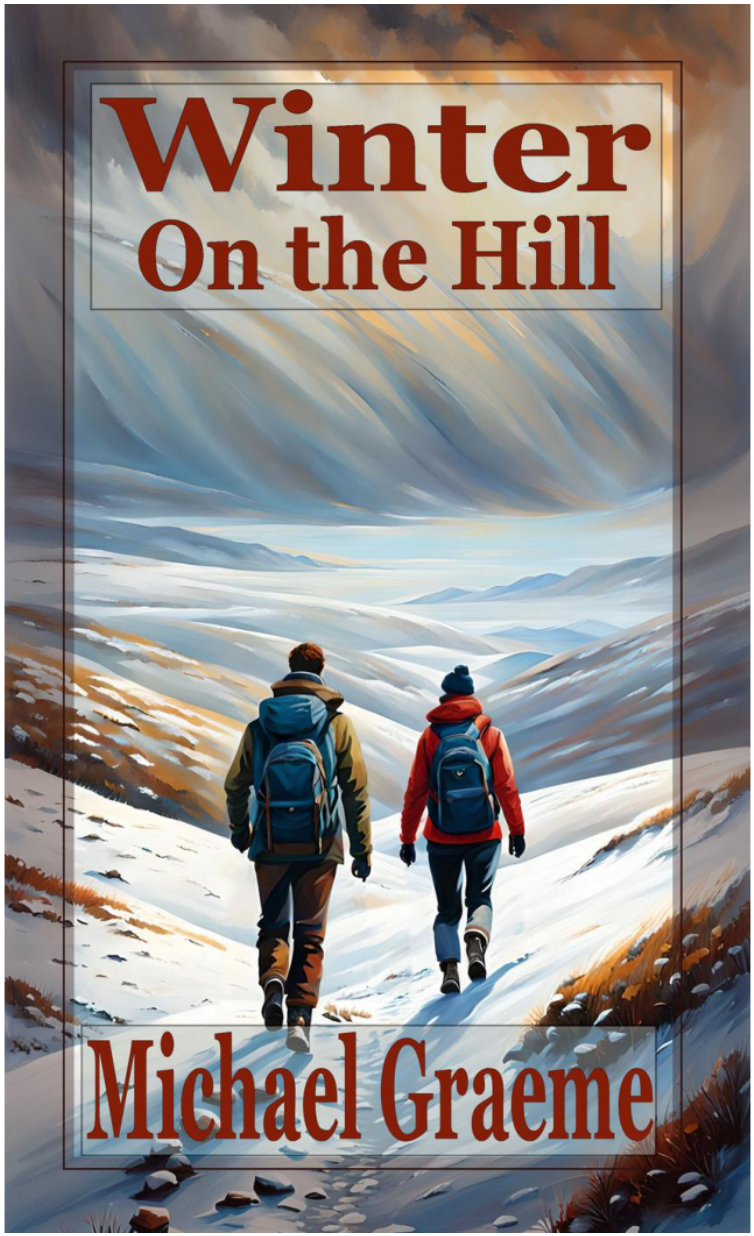
Winter
On the Hill
Michael Graeme

Winter on the Hill
by
Michael Graeme

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Chapter One

Pendle Hill, late December. Visibility variable. It drifts in and out in the mist, from a couple of yards to a few feet. Wind, a steady north-easter with light rain. It's not fierce, but enough to drain your spirits, and it doesn't take much to do that these days.

I'd be okay on my own. I know exactly where I am, and exactly how to get off the hill, but then I've got Laura for company. She's seventy fiveish and fit enough, well togged out but a little slow on her feet. Then there's queer little Lottie – fiftyish, and snug in hand-knit woollens and a cheap Kagool. She'll be sweaty under all that lot, but doesn't complain. Indeed she hasn't said anything all afternoon... tagged on to me and Laura early in the day and stuck. Now here we are, about an hour of daylight left, and the rest of the crew God knows where.

A lot of weird stuff happens on Pendle. You know? Witchy stuff. There's plenty of folklore – religious and diabolical. Visions too. There are ghosts, ghouls, trolls and all the other demons you can imagine, which right now I'm trying not to. Instead it's the walkie-talkie crackling to life that gives me a fright:

"Rick. I'm missing two. You got them? Over."

"Yes, we're all fine. *Over*."

"So where are you, exactly? *Over*."

"That doesn't help me, Al. I know exactly where I am. Where are *you*? *Over*."

"We're bivvied down. *Over*."

"Nice for you. Coordinates, please, Al. *Over*."

Al gives me the coordinates. I finger them on the paper map, check our position against a first-gen Garmin. Okay, so they're a hundred meters north of north west.

"Are we all right, Rick? Have we lost the others?"

This is Laura. She's enjoying the disorientation of the mist and the failing light. But then she's not tasked with looking after anyone else, like I am. And neither was I, until this morning, when Al asked me to walk with the slowest of the group, so we wouldn't lose anyone. That was the theory anyway. But the group, being of somewhat mixed ability, we ended up strung out over a mile of Pendle bog and heath. So we lost them – and me being backstop, well, here I am with the two slowest tail-enders.

"We'll be fine Laura. How are you holding up?"

"Oh, I'm perfectly all right, thank you, Richard. Can we find our way do you think?"

"Yes. Absolutely. Lottie? You okay?"

Lottie gives an emphatic nod, smiles, gives me a thumbs-up. Yes. She's fine.

So, they both trust me. If my fingers weren't aching with cold, that would do me the world of good, I mean to have someone trust me again. After all, what the Hell do I know? I thought I could change the world, save it even, got myself arrested for it, dammit, and look how that turned out.

I must have been insane.

Sure, Laura's fine, a woman with a serene exterior laid over a spirit of considerable grit. As for Lottie? I've no idea. She's serene, yes, but then what? All she does is invade my space and smile, so I've no other choice but to suppose she's leaking somewhere. She does smell rather nice though, something sweet and musky. There's something vulnerable there too... a delicacy that would suit more a rose garden, than the windswept roof of Lancashire.

I used to carry a compass all the time on walks, never took the outdoors for granted, in my younger days. But then I never had to use one. So this is it: my father's war-department crow's foot marked prismatic compass, circa 1942, to the rescue. I flick it open, damp the dial with the pin, let it settle...

"Over here a bit," I tell them. Laura walks close, Lottie closer, even taking hold of my rucksack strap with a cute, mittened hand. Thus, I lead them both as if blind.

It's a twelve-man bivvy. I see the glow from a super-bright LED lamp, from quite a way out. It's almost disappointing. The first time I use my dad's compass in anger it's to set the direction, then a superior technology takes over and reels me in. Technology, eh? We could have used it to liberate us, but the wrong hands got hold of it and now we're slaves to it. It reads our minds, tells us what to think, and who to vote for. I haven't carried a smartphone for years. I'm sure the machinery still knows where I am though. It could still dial me up somehow, if it wanted, and point the finger. But there's no sense making things easy for it.

Al's waiting outside, crouched, anxious, staring into the mist. When I'm in range, she throws me a hug which I find startling because I'm angsty about her, and I barely know her. Plus I suspect

she used to be with Bazzer, and still is in all important respects. But something in that hug speaks of more than relief. As walk leader she screwed up, lost a trio of crumblies (myself included) on the hill. So I saved her reputation, saved her authority with the group. And if it's more than that, what else does that hug speak of, and am I not imagining it?

Well, if you'll forgive me, she's generously endowed. Sure, there's, no avoiding that fact, and I find the press of that bosom against my chest altogether dangerous in its comfort. But it's more even than that. From a distance, there's a sternness about her, while up close she smells warm, and safe, and tender... and the unexpected longing it conjures up tells me I'm lacking all three.

Yes, I go a lot off how a situation smells.

Strange isn't it?

It's only me of course, projecting a need, seeing something in someone that's not actually there. And more important than that, when that someone looks at me, she most likely sees nothing at all. Thus it is I'm misinterpreting her every gesture. It's a lesson you're taught in the ferment of your teen years – I mean not to trust this stuff – but I've always been a slow learner.

"Thanks, Rick."

"You were worried?"

"Feel a bit guilty for leaving you behind. I didn't keep a weather eye. The mist came up so quick."

"That's Pendle for you. But we were fine."

"Wasn't sure I could rely on you though."

"Ha, thanks. Well, now you know."

She's joking, and so am I, at least in so far as this situation goes. But in a more self absorbed way, I'm wondering – I mean about that word: *reliability*. I'm reliable enough, at least to myself – indeed self-reliant to a fault these days. So I'm pretty confident I'll never die on a hill, unless it's a heart attack. That's every outdoor man's secret wish of course, and better than wasting away in an overcooked old folk's home.

No, it's crossing the road that will get me. I'm useless among people. They whizz about, do the strangest of things, and always against the flow of reason. They strike at me from unexpected directions and I can't make head nor tail of them. I never know which way to look and how to see what's coming. And since I know I can't rely on them, it seems only fair I should hesitate to have

them rely on me.

"An hour till dark," I remind her.

"Yes. Thirty minutes down to the bus from here. We'll rest for ten." This sounds sensible. Matter of fact. "What do you think of the bivvy?" she asks.

"Impressive."

"Let's squeeze in with the others, then, and warm up a bit."

"Okay."

Squeeze in with Al? If only it was me and her, alone. Hell my hands are cold. Should have bought some gloves or mitts or something.

Okay, so... yes, it's an impressive Bivvy. Like an igloo. Rapid assembly. Packs to nothing. Up in fifteen seconds. Windproof, waterproof and, with fourteen bodies inside of it now, it's cosy to say the least. Half the group are anxious, the rest unconcerned, the latter because they've no imagination.

Bazzer lounges, eyes closed, an old soldier, used to catching what winks he can, when he can. I settle in a corner, force myself to accept the heat of the others, though it repels me. Al squeezes into the middle, sits cross-legged, smiling. At me. Lottie's shuffled over, quiet as a mouse, close enough so our thighs are touching. There she goes again – always that disconcerting lack of need for personal space.

What is that you're feeling, exactly? Analysis please, Rick. Well, I don't know if it's pleasure at the warmth, or if it's Al, or Lottie or both, whose company I'm most enjoying. And I'm wondering too if either of them are wanting to hump my bones. (Do people still say that?) A part of me says I'd sooner it was neither of them, because I'm old enough to know there's no such thing as a free shag these days. It was different when I was young of course, and everyone seemed to be shagging all over the damned place, and why not, since they never seemed to pay the price? But this is fantasy, a mish-mash of unfamiliar thoughts. And it's hardly appropriate under the circumstances, so best avoided.

And we've still to get off the hill.

It's a weird season, this half-lit never-never period between Yule and New Year. I spend it alone usually. I lie in bed as late as possible, retire early with the sun, thus passing winter in a state of near hibernation... the clock ticking out what bit of life I've got left. Yes, I know, I'd wanted to change all that. Have I not said it

thousand times? Well this could be it, that change, I mean. But for me – as for Sartre – Hell is the other people, yet without them I realise I've not even the will to get myself out of the house.

Bazzer opens a bloodshot eye, notices Al fixated on me, closes the eye again. I wouldn't like to make an enemy of Baz. I reckon he and I are already on opposite sides of a serious divide, though he doesn't know it yet. I've noticed how military families like his tend to revere the party of the rich and the royal. So a lefty republican, ex-climate activist like me is bound to be on a sticky wicket with him. I do like the guy though, and I want to understand him.

I told you, people confuse me. So what next, in this situation? Is it even a situation at all? And if it is, how the Hell did I wind up in it?

Chapter Two

I suppose we have to go back to November, a bitterly cold Friday afternoon, spitting rain like little icicles. I'm at the war memorial at Grindleton. Like every year, I'm looking for my great-uncle's name: Charlie Monroe. It's always a struggle with those faded names nowadays, softened so much over time you only need a bit of rain and they dissolve into the background, a list of twenty lads, all sinking into the dirt of a hundred years, as the weather turns foul.

Grindleton wouldn't have been that big back then, I mean at the time of the Great War, and these the best of its young men. But it's not just twenty lives is it? How many hundreds might they have given life to, had they lived? And who among them might have lent their minds to solving the problems we face now? How many doctors, engineers, thinkers, writers? We'll never know. And lives like theirs, like my great-uncle's weren't considered important by the monied, any more than ours are now.

As with all villages with a modicum of religious faith remaining, there'll be a ceremony come Sunday. Remembrance Day. There'll be little cubs and fresh faced scouts and maybe some crusty old soldiers from the British Legion in their white gloves, blazers and berets. But the names themselves, the John Smiths and the Jack Parker's and the Charlie Monroe's of a century ago, they're all fading into something more abstract now, something symbolic: *at the going down of the sun, and in the morning,... and all that.*

Great uncle Charlie was spoken of in hushed tones by my mother's family, my grandmother's brother. "Lost in the war", they would say, the word "lost" carrying with it a sense of mystery at a life arrested, pregnant with the "lost" years, the potential for what he might otherwise have become.

I take the little wooden cross from my pocket, on which I've penned his name, and I press it into the soil of the planter at the memorial's base, set it up neat among the heathers and the winter pansies. I'm not religious, but I do this every year, for reasons too complex to get into here. I'm usually alone but this afternoon, there's this scruffy guy sitting to one side quaffing a can of beer, and his presence is making me want to hurry, to turn my collar and get back to the car.

I'd noticed him too late or I would have walked on by, come

back another time. I never did *do* people. Only the dead lie at a comfortable enough distance for me to engage.

"Oh, I know what you're thinking," he says.

Really? I doubt that. My thoughts are beyond the pale these days and I defy anyone to get a grip on them. Actually, I feel intimidated by this big bloke, unshaven, a mischievous twinkle in his eyes, maybe even drunk. I don't know Grindleton any more, but I've no doubt there'll be drugs and other bad things here, like everywhere else now, bad characters proliferating since my mother's time, the time this street rang to the sound of her heels on a Saturday night – off down to the station, and the train to Middleton, and the ballroom dancing.

Yes, people really did that in the old days. How... Innocent. How... charming. Did it myself for a time in the eighties. Did it to meet girls. Didn't work.

It was always my mother's village, a place she pined for all her married life, exiled in Marsden after her marriage – Marsden being just ten miles away. She never returned. It's changed now beyond her knowing, and to top it all this year there's the added disgrace of this drunk guy sitting with a carrier bag full of beer, talking to me.

It's private, this thing, this act of remembrance. I'm not just remembering great-uncle Charlie – I mean how could I? I never met him. It's something more, something for my mother and her sisters – all of them gone now, all of them "lost" in the past; and there's something about that past, *her* past and by association my own past and the possibly misguided sense of my squandered potential, that great-uncle Charlie might have made better use of the nigh on sixty years I've had thus far, when he had to make do with just twenty five, and five of them in a lice infested uniform I fancy he must have hated. So maybe it's a little twist of bitterness, that makes me momentarily defiant, and I turn to this beery slob and I say: "So what's that then? What do you think I'm thinking?"

"Ignorant bastard," he says. "That's what you're thinking. Remembrance Sunday coming up and you there wanting a quiet moment with your fallen, and then there's me, this cretin, neckin' beer."

"I wasn't thinking that."

But I was of course. All introverts are liars. We have to be. God help us if we ever started speaking our minds.

"Well, 'appen you should," he says. "So, which one's yours then?"

I wipe the raindrops from the memorial, find the name, point it out.

"France?" he asks.

"Mesopotamia, 1918, a week before the Armistice. All the others died in France."

Too much information, Richard. Now he's going to want to know how you know about the others, and then you'll have to explain to him about the long hours you spent, to say nothing of the money, trawling through the Forces War Records, and "Ancestry.com". And he doesn't look the type who'd be interested.

I try to head him off with my own question: "You?" Not that you care. You just want to get away from him while demonstrating the bare minimum of politeness.

"Me?"

"Any of them yours?"

He shakes his head, drains the tin, crushes it flat in his bear-like paw. "Nah, none of mine's up there, at least not so far as I know."

He's quiet for a moment and I'm thinking he's finished, that I might slip away now, and thank goodness. The words are even forming in my mind: "Well... I'd best be..." but then he says:

"Ardennes. Aden. Falklands. Belfast. That's where mine fell."

This pulls me up. "Ah. Military family then?"

Does it impress you, Richard? It does? Why is that? Is it that he's suddenly an alien creature, so far beyond your own experience and understanding?

He nods. "Aye. In the army me-self for twenty years. Invalided out in the end."

"You were wounded?"

Doesn't matter Richard. England is another country now. A place of flag waving racist bastards. Let it go, be on your way... you're not interested.

"Shot in the arse by one of me own. Accident, like. Live firin' exercise. Not much glory in that, is there?"

I admit this does sound somewhat perverse.

"Not much glory in death either," I tell him, "Just... well... death. My great-uncle Charlie died of malaria." *Philosophy, Richard? Now is not the time, or the place.* "I mean, where's the glory in that?"

"True," he says, then pulls another tin from his carrier bag, cracks it open. He contemplates it for a while. "It was a good life.

The army. Enjoyed it. Doesn't suit everyone. But I was a bit wild as a lad, and it calmed me down, applied me to something useful, not so destructive – well not destructive to me and me own at least. Shot and bombed the hell out of other places. Had some good mates, too. The best. You ever served?"

"No. The army would have made mince-meat out of me." Such honesty, Richard. Are you looking for sympathy or denials?

"Then you wouldn't know, and no disrespect. Hard to describe... but you'd die for your mates, kill for 'em too. Nowadays I work in a shop for this evil, penny-pinching bastard who, I suppose, all your lads up there died for, that he might live, so to speak, and make a life out of screwing us over, customers and workers alike." He sighs. "Well, I used to work for him. Told him to shove it last week."

"Ah... that's bad... I'm sorry."

Works for a tyrannical bastard who pays him next to nothing, has him running around like a slave, yet he probably still votes Tory.

"Way of the world, mate," he says. "Anyway... I like to share a drink with these lads now and then, even if I don't know 'em. Or how, or why they died."

Yes, yes... that's definitely what I was thinking earlier: *Ignorant bastard*. But you never can tell, can you? There seems something of a sudden less crass about him, less threatening, something almost noble. He offers me a sip from the can. Ah... awkward, eh, Richard? So you sit down with him for a while, take your sip. The day is cold, the beer colder, and it makes you gassy as soon as it hits your stomach, but you're feeling a little warmer than you have in a long time, so starved you are of company you'll sit down with this drunk guy who most likely votes Tory and is an arch-Brexiteer to boot, who still thinks we're better out of Europe, in spite of all the rational evidence to the contrary.

"So, what about you then," he says.

"Me?"

"What do you do, like? If you don't mind my asking"

"Oh... I'm retired. Took it early, last year. Don't do anything now, really. Research my family tree. I also fancied myself as a bit of a writer but nobody cares much about stories any more."

"I like stories."

"Really?"

"Read westerns mostly. Got a shed load at home."

"You mean like Louis L'Amour, and all that?"

"Yea, that's your man. What do you write then?"

Westerns? Now don't be sniffy, Richard. True, they're hardly literature but it's so rare to meet anyone who actually reads anything any more. But he asked you what you wrote:

"Hard to say. My story. Your story. My great-uncle Charlies story. Finding the meaning of life in stories like that. Some might call them ordinary. But they're not. It's just that no one's interested in anyone else, which is odd because it's only in relation to others any of us can be said to exist at all."

What? You actually said that to him? You of all people, for whom other people, *real people*, is the definition of Hell? Also I note you didn't mention your leftist opinion pieces in those journals the Tory red-tops scream blue murder about, and thereby effortlessly demonise into vanishing obscurity.

The guy nods sagely, then he's quiet for a while and you're thinking you've lost him but then he smiles. "'Appen you'll find meaning in all of that for yourself if you persevere at it. But you're right, and no disrespect, but nobody cares about little stories like ours. Grindleton? Miserable little place, innit? A load of pokey gritstone houses way up here on the edge of the moors. That's all anyone would think passing through. Always winter up here, even in summer. But look through any window down this street and there's a story that means everything to its owner."

I'm not sure what he's saying. Each little window shrinks life, shrinks each story to a footnote, renders it manageable, but there are so many windows, so many stories and the only common theme I can come up with in all of them, whether they hide behind colourful drapes or tired, droopy old nets, is loneliness, isolation and the need for connection. And I'm thinking too, fuck them, because they've not the sense to organise, and if they ever did find the nous, the ruling bastards would have them labelled as commies in every red-top from London to Lanarkshire, so better keep their peace and hide in poverty and obscurity than be tarred with that brush and red-filed like me, as potential revolutionaries.

I speak metaphorically of course, I've no idea if the file is red.

What's that he's asking now?

"Come down off the moors then have you?"

"Em..."

"Noticed your boots, that's all... bit muddy like."

"Aye, a bit knackered too. Wouldn't pass muster in the army,

eh?"

"Well, they could do with a bit of spit and polish, that's for sure."

"Walked round by the reservoir." Don't say any more, Richard. Don't tell him you're living just up the road or he'll be knocking on the door, inviting himself and his beer-cans in – *just passin' like.*

"Well, if you ever fancy a fresh pair," he says. "They've a sale on at Campsmart in Middleton. You know Campsmart?"

"Yes, I know it."

"Mate of mine works there. Ask for Big Al. Say I sent you. Name's Baz, by the way. Bazzer."

He offers me that great bear-paw of a hand and we shake. "Richard... Rick..."

"Pleased to meet you, Rick."

"Yes... likewise."

I've not known anyone by their nickname since my schooldays. Bazzer? That would be Barry, I suppose. He doesn't seem a bad bloke, actually. Is it really necessary to be so reserved with him? Or maybe it's more you don't know what to say, but his beer is definitely making him over-familiar and you don't like that. You need your space. Next thing you know he'll be inviting you down the pub with his inebriate mates. Then they'll bring up politics, discover your colours and beat you to a pulp. Fuckin' commie bastard. No... socialist.. fuckin',...

Get out of there, Richard. You'll never find yourself in relation to others. You're too far gone, mate, too deep inside the pit of your own head, and it'll take more than this guy to haul you out of it.

"Well, best be going then, em... Baz..."

"Aye, see you around then, Rick. You take care, now, mate."

I hand him back the can, wonder if he'll mind my germs on it, wonder again about keeping in touch. Does he live in Grindleton? You never did know how to make friends, always leave it to fate and for others to do the running, which is why your circle of friends, even in the movement, and after sixty years, is now a big, fat zero.

I leave him sitting there in the rain, still wondering about his story, telling myself I'm interested yet not interested enough to go for the details of it. Only if he was long dead, and his details archived, would I be motivated these days. Or then, it's easier just to make stuff up, eh, Rick? Story of your life: how a fiction is always easier to concoct than it is to face the facts. Which are what?

That your life used to be pretty full-on when you thought you could change the world and make everyone’s lives just that little bit richer, and now when you know for sure you can't, it's empty?

Question, Rick: does that mean it's over?

Up to you, I suppose.

Chapter Three

I had to move away from Marsden. Too many memories, also the proximity of my wife's family, who never forgave me for her death. So I live here now, which is nowhere really, this lone house on the edge of the moors, a couple of miles out of Grindleton. It's beautiful in summer – at least those summers we escape the heath-fires – insufferably grim in winter. At 1100 feet, we get snow here when nobody else does. It's an old house, late sixteenth century, tired out, having defeated several generations before me, and is of course quite beyond my fixing up properly. The heath-fires nearly claimed it last summer, and now, in winter, the rain and run-off from the moors threaten to sink it in mud. I'm thinking I'll make do until something else comes along, though I know it wont – come along, I mean – because I'm not exactly looking, indeed not exactly doing much at all these days.

It's what I imagined I always wanted, a place on the moor's edge like this, and no neighbours. I've had the roof done and the windows, thinking that was enough to weather-seal it, but now the damp seems to come from the earth itself, under the boards. De-humidifiers rattle and battle valiantly but, like my tenure here, matters always seem just one good rainstorm, or one stray burning ember from defeat. And it's empty. Needs a woman. But what chance of that at my age?

It's sunset now as I write, a brief clearing of weather over the plain and the Irish sea beyond, which appears as a thin, white sparkling line holding up a glowering sky. If you can see the sea it means it's going to rain. If you can't it's already raining. Rain, rain, rain, all the time now, and by the looks of it, more coming in for sure. I used to take the car down to the sea, to Southport, for the sunsets, but now I just sit and watch from up here... watch it fade out and the night coming on.

I write nothing of consequence any more... and even the things I wrote that I thought were consequential – I mean politically savvy – turns out they weren't. Sure, I've been vociferous in leftist politics for most of my life, but as matters have become more desperate, so too the opposition has become more determinedly mendacious, and ultimately violent – dozens of canvassers hospitalised last time by packs of rented thugs. If our democracy had been subverted by a

malign foreign power they could not have made a better job of it than we've made ourselves. Nowadays I'm careful to concern myself only with the facts of lives long passed, as detailed in the online archives, and I colour in the blanks with imagination, taint everyone, so to speak, with the stain of my own shortcomings.

I get bats here, and owls, foxes prowling too, and boy racers of course on the pitch-black lane, doing a hundred miles an hour in their precarious little vehicles. They seem so careless of life and limb, perhaps because they know they're all fucked anyway. Five fatalities on that road last year, all of them on the bend by the reservoir, so if the impact doesn't kill them outright, they end up in the water and drown. I try not to think of it. Death is more palatable, even to be blown apart by a shell or with your lungs seared by mustard gas, when held at a considerable distance in time. Like those names on the memorial, it becomes a more abstract concept, and manageable.

I've no TV, and poor Internet up here, it being squeezed a good few miles along a copper wire, and ever so weary by the time it reaches me. I don't own a mobile phone any more. The house contained an antique GPO Bakelite hand-dial thing from the seventies, complete with a startlingly shrill ring produced by an actual hammer on a bell, and I make do with that. It's much safer for someone of my past associations, even someone who isn't anyone, or in any way active in anything any more.

So here I hide, a place where only the elements of fire and water threaten my demise, which seems a little unfair given the time I spent shouting about the impending climate catastrophe. I don't see what more I could have done though, nor why the Gods should be so angry with me now. We were simply crushed by the money. I reckon we've got thirty years before the harvests fail and we start fighting over food, but one way or another I'll be gone by then.

And yet, for all of the imminent threat of my being washed away or burned to a cinder, I do like it up here, that is between the usual spells of loneliness and self doubt. My kids say it suits me, though they've never visited. Too busy, now. I used to track their lives through their Instagram accounts, until they blocked me. They used to tolerate my lurking, but warned me never to comment in case their mates knew it was me, and that wouldn't be cool, especially since I used to bat for the losing side.

She thought I was having an affair, my wife, shared her

suspicions with her mother who concurred that my suddenly having a shower every morning before setting out to work was indeed an obvious sign of betrayal, that even my exasperated denials were proof enough of guilt. And then the mouse! Yes... the mouse. She could not share a house with a mouse and moved back in with her mother until I'd caught it, she'd said.

But there was no mouse, and it would all have been funny, except she died – something on the brain while she slept. It's common, apparently, though not always when sleeping. I don't know if we were classed as separated or not at the time. I suppose technically not, but life is never so neat as to be easily categorised. More often it shirks labels.

The kids didn't believe me – I mean, that I wasn't having an affair – which is the real reason for their coolness, their distance now... that and the fact they lost their mother and they needed a reason, needed someone to blame for it. There always has to be someone to blame these days. Have you noticed? Mel didn't really believe it, not deep down, I'm sure, but the cat was out of the bag as soon as she told her mother, because others, it seemed, were ready enough to think the worst in me, though I'd given no just cause, to say nothing of thirty years to the marriage.

Pearl that is.

Thirty years.

In case you were wondering.

That's about all the time we've got left, by the way. I mean *all* of us.

Think about that.

Introvert, that's me. We'd be running the world, except no one listens to us. Thus I emerge from those thirty years an old man and with less than I had when I started out. How do you go from all of that to zero, and not be tainted by it? I don't suppose you can, but on good days I tell myself I'm not really old – ageing maybe – that I don't have less, but actually about the same: an old car and a broken down house, and a brief span of time to work out the point of a life, even as the planet dies along with me. But there, you see? that's what's missing: youth. I have at best twenty years ahead of me, twenty five maybe, unlike before when I had half a century.

All right, so I'd taken to showering every morning, thinking to wake myself up for the long commute into Manchester, after a sleepless night spent listening to Melissa snore. Dearest Mel. Hell,

you could have just said you were bored and wanted to call it a day. Now I hide up here in the mists and the perpetual rains, from the imagined dagger of your mother's eyes, to say nothing of those rather obvious black Range-Rovers and the occasional suspicious drone, both I imagine sponsored by MI5 whose job it is to compile data and risk assessments on people like me. As for Mel, a sudden death is hard to digest of course. Like I said, much easier if there's someone to blame. And who to blame it on, other than myself?

What to do then? How to stop one's brain from eating itself under those circumstances. Well, certainly not by living all the time inside one's head, Richard. A man needs to get out into the world, even into the teeth of winter. There are hills all around here and I used to know every step of them, but my boots are nearly as old as I am and certainly as knackered. And the tracks are sodden with perpetual rains. Therefore the solution is obvious: I need better boots.

Baz... Bazzer, or whatever he was called... that sad, drunk guy was right. Some fresh boots are needed, and while I'm at it a good mountain jacket, something light and breathable, some of those waterproof pants, and a pack with an air-back. And a hat. And legs. I need better legs no doubt by now, and lungs, and that all takes work. And time.

But boots first, you old sad-sack. Let's get this show on the road!

Chapter Four

So, Middleton, Saturday, two weeks before Christmas, a misery of dead trees and piped pop-carols, all seeping from the shops like a festering sore – season of good will and all that. I have fastened a sprig of berried holly to my door-knocker, my only deference to the season – something pagan about it that I like. But don't you go thinking political defeat has turned me into a Scrooge, or that my politics makes me anti-religion either – just more sensitive to corrupt hierarchies, that's all.

I have counted three beggars huddled in doorways and slipped each one a fiver, bought the last one a brew and gave him my hat because he looked frozen and near to death. It doesn't solve the problem, I mean that they will all likely all die of starvation or cold anyway unless our particular hierarchy is fixed, which won't be any time soon, but then all that leftist activism didn't help much either, did it? But it's not my fault if the rest of you dick-heads are content to let this happen, and vote consistently for a system that brings greater impoverishment on us all.

And the racism, man... the hate,...

Are you happy with things this way?

And if the other lot could sweep so much before them, claim so decisive a victory, how come they're still so angry?

But enough of that. I'm not political now. That's all history. Actually, I don't give a fuck about you any more. I'm done. This story's about me. Time I told my own story for a change, instead of trying to sell someone else's.

Campsmart is quiet, a young man lounging at the counter, flicking on his phone and with the bored expression of one who's not had a sale all day, and isn't expecting one.

"Help you, mate?"

I remember my kids at his age so, no, I doubt he can help me at all.

"I was told to ask for Big Al."

He smirks, buzzes through to a colleague. "Hey Al. Guy out here wants you."

Walking gear has moved up a notch since my day... fancy fabrics, fancy colours, oddly shaped boots. While I wait for Al, I run my finger along the display, favouring the more traditional leather

styles, the scent of them, and the knotty feel of a Vibram sole. They have a pair of Scarpas which I take down and fondle. My first boots were Scarpas. Italian made. Had them twenty years. Never leaked. I'll settle for these, discount or not. Money's not a problem for me. I've been frugal, climbed the corporate ladder as much as my politics allowed, invested well. Yes, gotcha! I know what you're thinking: Cappuccino Socialist... Well fuck you. I'm short of nothing except time, and that's something we're all short of now, only most of you haven't worked that one out yet.

"Good choice."

It's a woman, and her badge says Alison. She's late middle years, a real looker in her day, I guess, shapely-slim, big chested, good arse squeezed into black denim. It's a crass introduction, I know, but I'm a man so this is how she strikes me, and I'm sorry girls but I'm not apologising for that to anyone any more.

"Big Al?"

"That's me. Only one other person in the world dares call me that though, and get away with it." She's smiling, charming, but I'm embarrassed now.

"Ah... sorry. I met this guy called Bazzer, said you might be able to help with a pair of boots. Ask for Big Al, he said. I imagined you'd be a bloke."

She nods. "His little joke. Don't worry about it. How is Baz?"

"Seemed okay. I don't really know him – just met in passing, got chatting like."

Something anxious in her eyes, now: "Was he drinking?"

"Em... yes, come to think of it."

She darkens, sighs. "Pub, was it?" Something sharp now. Am I drinker too, she's wondering, like Baz? This woman does not care for drinkers. Well am I a drinker? Not much these days, but who cares what she thinks of me?

"War memorial, actually."

"What was he doing there?"

"Just sitting."

"And drinking?"

"Drinking, yes. But not drunk. Definitely not drunk."

Why am I defending him? He was clearly drunk.

"I can give you ten percent off the Scarpas," she says. "Try them on? You look like a nine? Am I right?"

"Sure, a nine. Bang on, thanks."

She's good with people, and in particular it seems she has a way of sizing up men. Fair enough. Saves time. I take a seat on the bench while she goes away to fetch the boots. I feel hot. Alison? Big Alison? Big what? Well, big chest of course, you dick. Hard to miss that.

Bazzer, the bastard, setting me up. And that kid smirking behind the counter. Both of them paid next to nothing, and probably didn't even bother to vote, or they believed all the demonising headlines, and, like everyone else, voted against their own best interests. Again.

Thus poverty and foodbanks, and racism are accepted into the culture as normal.

Thick as pig-shit, the lot of you.

Whoa... whoa, whoa!

Steady Richard – it's more complicated than that, and you know it is. But it's all over now, mate. You're a free man. Free of it, you hear? So tone down the anger. You're beginning to sound like the other lot.

Al comes back, kneels, takes the boots out of the box, removes the packing paper, arranges the laces, something slow and deliberate about her movements, something authoritative and soothing. And I need soothing, maybe some authority as well.

"Like some walking socks to try with these?" she asks.

"Please. And I'll take a pair home with me too. Merino wool, if you have them."

"Sure do."

"I'm after a decent mountain jacket too. Not Gortex though. Sympatex is more my speed. Do they still call it that?"

"Don't have anything with Sympatex, but I know what you mean. We've one with a newish fabric, similar membrane tech. You've a choice of migraine-orange or olive-green."

"I'll take the green."

"Prefer to blend in then? Me too. You look like a medium."

"Yep."

"I can throw in a decent fleece layer for twenty quid."

"Fleece? Yes... okay. I'll take it."

"Sounds like you're just starting out. Joined a walking group yet?"

Hmm, she considers me an old fart then, taken to walking recently. Bags of money. Rambling with the woolly-hat brigade. A walking group sounds like hell to me, hell being.. you guessed it: other people.

"Not starting out exactly. More like restarting after a bit of a pause."

"How long a pause?"

"Oh, you know? Wife, kids, house. That sort of pause."

She nods, ripple of a smile, teasing. "The whole catastrophe, then?"

"Something like that."

"Don't worry. You'll get back into it."

"I will with these." I hand her back the Scarpas, wondering how long it'll be before I'm over the idea of getting them muddy, even though it's what they were made for.

I remind myself it was around this time last year I was getting myself arrested for blocking traffic in London's Oxford Street – me and a hundred others. We were carted off in paddy wagons and hauled up before the beak for civil disobedience. After a largely dull and blameless life I'm suddenly a bad-ass with a criminal record, fingerprints, and a mug-shot in the files of state security too... oh and there's still scars on my wrists from the tie-wraps they use now. And today, here I am bothered about getting my new boots dirty. So I'm harmless, okay? A changed man. You've really nothing to worry about.

What's that she's saying now?

"There's a walking group heading up Pendle on the 28th. Coach leaves from the market square at nine. Bring a tenner if you like and you're in."

I used to know Pendle quite well, summit 1827 feet – if memory serves – done all the routes: Boar and Ogden Clough, or straight up the big end, though as usual it was all a long time ago. I'm tempted, and I know walking with a group is a good way to get back into things. But, a group, Rick? A group of *people*?

"The 28th, you say?"

That's that dead period between Christmas and New Year? Not likely. I'd sooner hibernate and sulk.

I tell her: "I'll... think about it."

She takes my stuff to the till. "Wear your boots around the house a bit for a few days. Any trouble bring them back."

"Okay, thanks, but they feel great. I'm sure they'll be fine."

Walking group? No way. I'd sooner stick pins in my eyes.

Chapter Five

"So... what do you do then, Rick?"

This is Al, Big Al, settling in beside me as the coach pulls out of the Market Square, Middleton. It's the 28th and we're bound for the little village of Barley at the foot of Pendle's big end. She's togged up like a pro, looks like she's done all the peaks in the UK, the Tyrol too. Maybe she's even one of those adventure holiday junkies who do the Himalayas and the Andes, except I remember she works at Campsmart on zero hours and minimum wage, because that's the way the owner-bastards like to play it, so it's unlikely she can afford any of that foreign walking stuff.

So anyway, what is this, Rick? What's this *really* about, this urge to find company among the walking fraternity. Is it like that old Ewan MacColl song: *wage slave on Monday, but free man on Sunday*? Is that what's going on here? Are we back in the era of the Manchester Ramblers, the nineteen thirties, the days of Benny Rothman and the mass trespasses? Is this some kind of weird leftist nostalgia-trip?

Hell, I remember I met Benny Rothman once, up by Holcombe tower. It must have been '92. I'd driven an hour to get there, climbed the hill breathless to make the gathering for the anniversary of those mass trespasses. I came as close that day as any of us would ever get to the birthing fire of the Socialist movement. He was ancient then, Benny, and like a God to me. He spoke well, filled us all with ire... truly you've no idea. None of you. And too late, now anyway.

You're all damned. And me with you.

"Retired, actually."

"Really? You don't look old enough." She's not flirting when she says this. I think she means it, but of course it puffs me up a bit anyway.

"Went a little early," I explain.

"So... what *did* you do?... I mean before. Sorry, am I being nosey?"

"No... no... I was a metrologist." No one knows what that is. I always have to explain.

"Like weather forecasting, you mean?"

"That's meteorology. A metrologist measures stuff."

"Measures?"

"It's the science of measurement. Engineering stuff. I worked in a factory. We made engines."

"Really?"

Yes, Al, really. I was also a union official, a member of the Labour Party with so-called hard-left tendencies, and a political activist, this meaning a leaflet poster, envelope stuffer and door-knocker for the CLP, but these aren't the times to be mentioning such things. I encountered enough spit and bile the last time round, and big Al probably also voted Tory and wanted out of the EU like everyone else. Yes, *you*. I'm looking at you, I can spot you a mile off, you fucking idiot.

She senses the tension in me, steers away from it. "Em... been up Pendle before?"

More times than I can remember. "A few times, yes."

"You know Boar Clough?"

"I know it. Round by the Ogden reservoirs."

Bazzer's up front in the courier's seat, chatting to the driver. I was surprised to see him when I got on the coach, but not at all surprised he didn't recognise me. That happens a lot. Introverts suck up information, store it, and remember it. We're like spies, the natural observers of life, the natural existential ponderers. The rest of you? You're too busy yacking about how great you are to notice anything or anyone else. All right, I know that's not true, but just let me get it off my chest – in case you hadn't noticed, I'm dealing with a lot of anger here, grappling with my own shadow, trying to find a way back to my self.

Like I told you, this story's about me, not you.

"Would you backstop for me, Rick?"

"Backstop?"

She hands me the walkie-talkie. "You know, keep pace with the slowest? We're fourteen today. Forecast's decent, shouldn't be a problem, but it's just good form, you know?"

"Wouldn't you be better with someone else?"

"Like who?"

"I don't know. I nearly didn't come today. You surely weren't relying on me?"

"No... but... just out of interest, why did you come? You didn't sound that keen when I mentioned it."

Ah, she picked up on that, did she? So... go on then Rick. Why

did you come? Was it nothing more than the possibility of an eyeful of Big Al's big tits? All right... maybe that would have been the case thirty years ago, but the testosterone is pretty much gone these days, and what a relief, eh? Okay, so it would still be really something, I imagine, to lie down with Al, all cosied up under the duck-down, to drift off and sleep with my head against her shoulder, and whether her tits are big or small have nothing to do with any of that. At least I don't think so. And I know anyone under fifty would never get that, so I advise you not to try.

"Boredom?" I suggest. "Fancied some company?"

She nods as if to say well done: good start along your road to rehabilitation. Such honesty, I mean, though I suspect only the former of those two things is true. And all of that would be to say she's a better measurer of things than me, but I have forty years of experience on her. A measurer extraordinaire, me. PhD. Doctor Dick. But now the Chinese do it better, without the title, or the jokes, and they do it much, much cheaper. But that commute was going to kill you anyway.

So what are you going to do about it? Well, I'm going to research my family tree and walk the hills, and after today, walk them alone because fourteen woolly hats on a bus is looking like fourteen too many, especially if I have to walk slower than the slowest, and help count them all off the hill like we're a bunch of kids.

"What about Bazzer?" I suggest.

She bridles a bit at that, which is interesting. "Bazzer? What about Bazzer?"

"I mean as backstop. Ex Army... you know?"

"So what?"

"Well... competent in the field... and all that. I mean... I presume..."

"Also egotistical. Has to be up front, always first to make the summit. Every time. Only ever thinks of himself."

"Really? Ah... well, fair enough. So who usually backstops?"

"Charlie."

"Let me guess: Charlie's like... eighty with bad knees and he couldn't make it today?"

She laughs. "Near enough. So, welcome to my world. Now, will you back-stop for me, Rick?"

"Of course I will." But only to be polite – not because she has

such a beautiful laugh, and definitely not because I'm beginning to like her. I see through her well enough; a little flirty, knows how to handle, as well as measure, a man, knows exactly how to get them to do what she wants. And I don't mind one bit.

"Thanks," she says.

Yea, right. You wouldn't thank me if you knew me.

I'm thinking she'll leave me now – I mean, having got her way – that she'll go back up front, plonk herself beside Bazzer, joke with him, in spite of the fact she turns grizzly at the mention of his name. Instead though, she settles in, buckles up, lays her head back on the rest.

"Thanks for coming anyway," she says. "More the merrier."

"No problem."

It's a while before I smooth out the turmoil in my head sufficiently to ask: "So... you've worked at Campsmart for long?"

"Couple of years now," she says. "Passes the time."

"Em... well... it's a job, I suppose."

"Not really. Jobs pay, Rick."

Okay. No answer to that without delving any deeper.

I may be a wage-slave on Monday... but I am a free man on Sunday.

I'm a rambler, I'm a rambler from Manchester way...

"So... you're married?" she asks. "You told me you were married."

"I did?"

"In the shop. Married you said. Kids. House."

"Oh, right. I was. Married. Widowed now, I think."

"You think?"

Stupid thing to say, Rick. "I mean, it's possible my wife and I were separated at the time she... passed away. I don't know if that makes me a proper widower or not."

Mother sorted the funeral. It was days before she even told me Mel was gone, like it was nothing to do with me any more. That still hurts. Vindictive old bat. Man, I'd no idea anyone could hate so much... that is until I started door-knocking for the CLP.

"Well... whatever," she says. "I'm still sorry to hear it." This sounds genuine.

"You?"

"What? Widowed?"

"No, married?"

"No... never."

"Kids?"

"No."

No kids? That explains the figure. Nothing like kids for ruining a woman's figure. Sorry, but it's true. And no wistful regret either. Notice that?

"So... your kids are grown up then?" she asks.

"Both working in London..."

And both think I'm a knob, both admire the ideologies of Thatcher and Reagan, admire money, though neither of them will ever have any, and I intend spending my way through everything I've got, so it stays that way.

"That's nice..." she says.

"Em... well..."

"Or not... as the case may be."

Cute smile. Meaningful. An intuitive woman. And I spent such a long time thinking she was a guy.

"Well, life is what it is."

She laughs. Nice Laugh. Smells nice. A fit woman. A tough woman. Not afraid of mice.

Oh... stop it, Rick. Where are we going with this?

"Laura's usually the slowest," she says."But don't worry about her. She's strong. Lottie too... not sure why Lottie trails behind because she's a tough walker as well, fitter than any of us... never misses a trip. Looks like the yoga type to me."

"Lottie?"

"Third row, left, fifties, long hair, looks thirty. Pleasant company but... well, there's something missing somewhere – you'll know when you meet her."

"Ah... okay."

"So... we're a team then? Rick and Al?"

She offers her hand. We shake.

"Absolutely."

This is new, this feeling. A kind of surge... emotionally, I mean.

I've had some useless bosses, and I don't think Al is going to be one of them. If she ever looks like she's about to screw up – which I doubt – I'm resolved of a sudden to do my best to see her through, because I suspect she won't take the credit for it. Other bosses? Let's just say I've been glad to see them sink, and some I've even helped on their way. I know... I know... all we're doing here is muddling a bunch of crumblies over Pendle Hill, not putting a man on the

moon, so it hardly matters does it?

It mattered to the Manchester ramblers though.

Look them up. Think about it.

Oh...come on. Just because I'm a socialist, don't give me all that communist crap. I know my Orwell and my Solzhenitsyn as much as my Marx and my Engels and that other fella... you know... Gramsci. That's him. So I'm not stupid, right? I know it's been pretty well established by now it's impossible for human beings to organise themselves without some sort of hierarchy. But that hierarchy's got to be based on merit and truth. When it's based on privilege and lies, man that's when it's corrupt, and you'd better watch out.

You a leaver Al? A racist? Sneer when you pass a mosque? Do you care much if Scotland breaks from the Union? Care much if the United Kingdom is reduced to... well just shabby old England with its busted roads and its NHS with A+E waiting times into days now?

Still be my friend Al?

Chapter Six

What was it all those swivel-eyed loons on the right used to call people like you Rick? Remoaners? Libtards? Snowflakes? And God help you if you'd been all those things plus gay, or a person of colour. Man, the filthy tabs had a field day with you. You can write the headlines yourself by now: a hundred pithy insults sneering out at you from the billionaires' foetid rags, and all that deranged, potty mouthed vitriol in the comments sections of social media...

You were the antichrist, man.

The weird thing is everyone knows they're being brainwashed. I mean, they must do, right? But they buy the fucking stuff anyway. And as the paper-presses decline, that same angry-old-white-guy stuff leeches into the Internet like junk food, poisoning it, clogging its arteries. And worse, that online stuff comes with eyes and ears, and it knows who you are and how to pitch an image or a message so you'll do exactly what it wants, say what it wants, vote how it wants. Racism and homophobia used to be something you only heard coming out the mouth of that one embarrassing uncle. Now its mainstream, plastered over every inch of our weeping infrastructure.

You happy with that?

You must be, man. Because you voted for it.

But so long as the telly works and there's petrol at the pump, and you can post your selfies to social media, why worry? True, there's others starving and freezing to death on the streets, but in terms of a percentage of the population it still isn't many, plus they're dirty and poor anyway, just druggies and alcoholics, so they don't matter, do they? Good riddance. And so what that Oz and California have been burning for years, and more and more of Greenland is turning, well... green? What is that?

It's normal, that's what it is.

So chill out and go shopping.

The coach bumps up the exit slip of the '61 and my forehead taps against the glass, jolts me out of my reverie, startles me with my own reflection – am I really as old as that these days? Hell, Rick, where did the time go, mate? It's dark now, and I struggle for my bearings. Where am I? What time is it?

Okay. We're ten minutes away from home, all safe down from

the hill now, and quite a day it's been too, a day of paradox and revelation. I'm feeling different, weary for a start – legs, thighs, abdominals, all beginning to ache – but I also feel stronger inside than I have in ages, even a touch more confident, though about what I can't imagine. I'd forgotten how a good walk can do that to you. Still, it'll take me an hour to fill the bath when I get home, and I swear I'm going to steam in it all night.

Al's up front in the courier seat now, on her own, Bazzer stretched out full length at the back. I think she would have travelled with me again but Laura beat her to it. It seems we're best of friends now after our little adventure – me and Laura I mean – and I don't mind that because she's sweet and ever so genteel. It could have been Lottie and thank God it wasn't because she's asleep on some poor guy's shoulder ,and I don't know what the etiquette is for that sort of thing, given what I know about her being in some ways a child in a woman's body. I've decided she's uncommonly attractive, but mentally unaware of it, entirely asexual in herself, I suppose, on account of her condition, whatever that is. There should be a taboo about being attracted – even for a moment – to someone like that, but there isn't.

These are just idle speculations, you understand? Experiments in thought. It's not like I'm going to do anything about it.

About what?

About loneliness, damn you.

"Everything all right, Richard?"

"Oh... fine Laura. Sorry if I dozed off."

"Not at all. Had a little snooze myself. Nothing like fresh air for knocking one out, is there?"

It's true, most of us are unfamiliar with normal quantities of oxygen, we lack the capacity to deal with it, and mostly we're just starved of it all the time.

We pull up on the market square and people rouse themselves, say their goodbyes, collect their gear and shuffle off into the night. I try to catch Al's eye, thinking to say a proper goodbye and thanks for a good day out, because it only seems polite, but she's in discussion with the driver, and Bazzer's hovering now like he wants a word with her too.

He thumps my arm as I pass. "Good to see you, Nick. Great to have another guy around on these walks. You'll be coming out with us again, I hope?"

He's still not worked out we've already met. He must have been drunker than I thought that time at the war memorial.

"Em... it's Rick. But, sure Baz. Good to meet you too. And yes... I'd like that."

I give Al a nod in passing, but I'm not sure if she's caught it. Never mind.

Hell, Rick, I thought we'd already decided this wasn't for us, this walking group malarkey. No... that was this morning. Something happened on the hill, remember? Something inside of you opened up a little and a chink of light shone in, lit up something from long ago, something that used to make you feel good, feel alive.

I collect my gear and go in search of the Beast.

The beast is an old Japanese four-by-four with a huge diesel engine. Yes, that's right, I said *diesel*. I did try a used electric, briefly – as insisted upon by my former eco-warrior credentials – but the thing wouldn't pull the skin off a rice pudding, and the batteries were buggered, wouldn't even hold a day's charge, and since it was charged by mains generated mostly by coal and gas fired power stations, it seemed a futile gesture anyway. What I'm driving now isn't exactly what I'd normally approve of then, but it doesn't matter. We're all as good as cooked now anyway. All you bastards who drive around in your pumped-up fuck-you luxury four by fours frightening the life out of the little people? Well this is my fuck-you too, though admittedly from the outside it does look somewhat dishevelled.

Not classy either, mate. Sooner you get this out of your system and scrap it, the better.

I'm not sure how it'll end exactly. Panic in the supermarkets I suppose. Starvation. People with guns will starve the slowest, or take the quickest way out. I wondered about investing in a gun for such an eventuality, except the state is unlikely to grant me a license on account of that black mark for civil disobedience – i.e. sitting down in the road. And anyway piece of garden hose shoved up the beast's tailpipe will serve just as well.

It's big and comfortable, twenty years old, done a hundred and fifty thousand, but everything still works, even the aircon, and she cruises well. Oh, the radio's bust – probably just a fuse or something – but I would have disconnected that anyway to spare me from its constant, useless blather, and the adverts of course. The main thing is she doesn't seem to mind being parked out on the moor in all

weathers. I do have to plug her in some mornings in winter, but that's to warm the oil in the sump, before I can turn her over.

She starts up, roars like a battle-tank, and I settle in to the vibrations for a moment. Then there's a tapping on the passenger side, Al's face framed in the glass. I slide it down.

What's that she's saying?

"Fancy getting something to eat?"

"What, like now, you mean?"

She nods.

Well, this is novel!

Have I ever turned a woman down before? I don't think I've ever had one ask me out before, and that leaves me a bit flummoxed. Okay, I know she's not actually asking me out as such, most likely just wanting to get me onside for the next walk, and would I mind being backstop again? The last thing a woman like this is going to be short of is company.

"Well... I'm a little mucky, Al. I need a hot bath and a large whisky."

"Oh... sure... okay. Me too, I suppose. No problem."

"Only joking about the whisky."

"Hope so, Rick. Bad for you. Well... see you around then."

Come on, don't be a Dick, Rick. You're not that far gone. Something to eat would be nice – soak your aching bones later. "Listen, can I..."

"What?"

"Drive you home?"

"Well, thanks, but my car's just over there."

"Ah right... far to go?"

"I live up the Coppice."

"Really?"

"You?"

"I'm up by Piccadilly."

She's most likely never heard of it, and no sense elaborating.

"Grindleton," she says. "Past the reservoir? That puts us on opposite sides of the moor, Black hill between us."

This is true. "To say nothing of four miles of mud."

"Ha! Pretty much these days. Isolated up there. I thought there was only that old pub, and it always looks like its about to fall down."

"Still does. House and me both. Forgot it used to be a pub,

actually. Coppice is nice. Always fancied living there."

"Yes, it's nice. Well... see you around then."

"Yes. By the way... thanks for today."

"Glad you came."

"So am I. Enjoyed it very much."

So invite me on your next walk, Al. Let me be your backstop, your deputy, your walking buddy. Anything. Ask me for that meal again. I'll come along with pleasure – don't know why I didn't before. Fear of... well something. Fear of feeling good perhaps and too much of that isn't good for your cynicism.

"Good... well then... bye."

She turns away, I slide up the glass and it clunks shut, shuts her out, shuts her away from me, and I feel oddly isolated, oddly empty. You're developing an attraction there aren't you, Rick? And that's unfortunate because you know... I mean... that would be seriously pathetic, wouldn't it?

And if not, it looks like you just blew it anyway.

Chapter Seven

It's black on the moor, no street-lights up here, of course, and the mist is down. I came out of Grindleton doing twenty, seeing only a couple of yards of the rain-flecked road in the beams ahead, and relying on the Beast's mile-counter to actually find the house. "Up-bit-Drinkhouse" some still call it, though it's not been a pub since the nineteen thirties, and an informal one at that. Strange how some stories bury themselves so deep in the psyche they are passed on from generation to the next.

Two tenths of a mile past the reservoir, large pot-hole on the left, then a bit of curiously scuffed road-marking. Front garden-wall on the right. Turn.

There'd been a BMW on my tail for miles, very bright headlights, pushing me along. I'd wondered if it was the spooks, watching, but I accept I've probably been paranoid about that for a bit too long, at the risk of making myself sound both ridiculous, and more important in the movement than I ever was. Plus, I doubt they would be so obvious. There will be a file on me... makes sense, but in such straitened times as these I find it hard to believe they're wasting much money on maintaining it. Anyway I'd pulled over, let the bastard race on into the night, wondered if my eyes were as shot as my nerves, that he was able to see so much more clearly than me. But at bottom I guess he was just less concerned about the risk to life and limb – especially mine.

Typical fucking Neo-con capitalist.

As I soak myself now in that deep bath, nothing but silence around the house, and black up against the windows, I wonder what it is I think I'm preserving here, my being so careful all the time. I might have finished today in a bar with Al, then followed her back to her place and woke up tomorrow post-coitus and smiling ear to ear. Well, all right, maybe not *that*, but it would have been golden to spend an hour in her company over a meal in a pub and just... talk. Talk with someone who isn't angry with the world all the time and thinks they know how to fix it, like I do. Except you don't want that do you, Rick? Or rather you want it with all your heart, while fearing it at the same time.

Fearing it's what? Bourgeois?

Hell, it would be great to get back to a bit of that bourgeois

oblivion, wouldn't it? There used to be such bliss in ignorance.

There was Rachel. She was interested for sure, but she'd not lost the fire, unlike you, indeed came back from that election defeat stronger than ever, more ideological than ever, cancelled her subscription to the Guardian, swapped it for the Tribune. Life with her would have been a life on the barricades, it would have been painting placards, always with an eye on the next protest, but you'd no stomach for it any more, had you? The enemy had you beat, your only comfort being that in beating you, it sealed also its own fate, its own destruction, along with everything else. Thus you find yourself paralysed, hiding away up here, a lonely crank on the moor's edge, waiting for the zombie apocalypse.

There's a path over the moors. It starts just outside my gate, leads off, meandering over the tussock grass, by some ruined farms, then over Black Hill and down the other side, to the Coppice, that quaint little hamlet, home to mines and smelting mills in the long ago, but now just a row of pretty little cottages, alongside a chattering brook.

And Al.

You could walk it tomorrow, birds singing, sheep grazing, come down to her cottage – if you knew where she lived – scrounge a brew and a chat, then walk back while she waves you off from her door, framed with roses, wearing a summer frock – yes I know it's the middle of winter. There's no sheep, no twittering birds, no roses, no summer frock, but we're fantasising here, okay, so just go with it...

Her hair is loose and tousled, and she smiles as you glance back one last time, returns you to your isolation, momentarily refreshed and feeling human again. Sure it might even be bearable, what bit of life is left, if you could only punctuate it with idyllic little interludes like that. Except she's a human being, Rick. So what does she want? What does she need? What's the central tragedy of her life – because you get to a certain age and there's always something. And do you really want to go there? You can't just take from a person, you know? At some point you're going to have to give something back.

All right, all right... you've given a lot already. Indeed, all your life you've been giving: family, marriage, Trades Union, Party, job... had it all thrown back in your face, shard by rusty shard, had it turn sour and fester into a thing so poisonous you're now reduced to the

status of an exile in your own land. You are a man without a country, nothing but the insides of your own head for company. Even your kids are thinking you betrayed your wife, and the world's dismissing you as a snowflake-libtard-pariah with shit for brains. And more, every day for years now, you've been beaten senseless with those rolled up red-tops, wielded by your own oppressed countrymen, every one of whom saw you – *you Rick* – as the enemy within.

What's his name?... that fella Gramsci... he was right. No matter how bad it gets, that cultural hegemony is like glue, keeps us all in the same old same old groove.

Well, fuck em. Fuck em all.

A whisky would be nice actually, the sweet oblivion of it. Except you downed your last bottle on election night, didn't you? bought it thinking it would be in celebration: new deal, climate emergency to the fore, an economy geared towards sustainable investment, and shared growth, and all those other good socially democratic things. I mean, how could you lose on a ticket like that, right? Remember that night? Remember the shock of the exit poll? The first results? You came round the morning after profoundly chastened, and tee-total.

You'd not realised the grip of the billionaires was so great, had you? that while you and your comrades had thought yourselves so convincing in your clever arguments, surfing in on a tide of resentment at a decade of austerity – actually you'd just been shouting in a bubble of your own prejudice and missed entirely the central point of your own irrelevance... that the most important thing was not poverty, staggering inequality and a planet in peril, but simply to *Get Brexit Done*.

How utterly banal!

But it doesn't matter, Rick. Just relax, now.

Soon be spring.

On the upside your investments made more that one night than they have in years. Oh, yes, that was a laugh, wasn't it? You're making more now than you did when you were working.

Al knows where you live. One day she might make that trip over the moors, turn up all flushed and sweaty, and scrounging a brew from you. You invite her in, you chat. You invite her out for dinner sometime – nothing heavy, no pressure, just... sometime. Sure, she'll be knocking on your door any day now.

Except why should she? It's given four degrees and rain tomorrow, which probably means snow up here. And the new year's looming. Normal people have parties and sing Old-Lang-Syne. Well, maybe she won't be coming for a while then. She'll come in the summer maybe, before the moors are torched again. Or maybe not, because by then she'll have forgotten all about you.

A meal. It was just a meal, Rick... you Dick.

Your hands were cold on the hill today, weren't they? Your knuckles still a little swollen and achy. Maybe you could do with a decent pair of gloves for next time. Sealskins. Lined.

Maybe what you need then is another trip to Campsmart.

Chapter Eight

She's not there of course. I lingered long in the shop, pretending to be interested in everything from camping stoves to Swiss Army Knives, but she didn't show up. It must have been her day off. In the end I came out with a multi-function Victorinox thing like I once had as a boy, plus the gloves, oh and a telescopic Alpine pole with an ice spike at the tip. I intend the pole shall serve a dual purpose – the official purpose, being to make things steadier when descending steep paths over rock, and the other, unofficially, as an improvised weapon to defend against loose dogs, an increasing hazard to the pedestrian now.

What? You don't like that? The thought of me stabbing a dog in the lungs? Well me neither, but dogs have terrified me since a private security blimp let one go "by accident" at an otherwise peaceful rally. There's not much defence against a creature like that when its blood's up, but a sharp stick's as good as you'll get, and has the advantage of being legal to carry, provided you don't admit its for self defence.

The Campsmart kid was unpacking a box of bits and bobs while being called a useless cunt by this lazy slob of a guy slouching behind the counter.

"And pull your pants up. Do you think I want to be staring at your crack all day. Wear a belt can't you?"

Small guy, polished, assertive of course, mouth like a sewer. This'll be the manager, then. Not the owner. The owner will still be in bed.

Certain management types have a particular lustre to them, externally at least, like fool's gold, one I've learned to recognise and read over the years I've sat as a union rep, negotiating with them. It's a form of self corrupting hierarchy – worker to boss, I mean – and I've often found it interesting to watch the transition in demeanour when an ambitious yet unintelligent worker is promoted to boss, because man... they're the worst.

He moderated his tone when I walked in, painted on a smile.

"Help you, sir?"

"Just looking, thanks."

I wonder if he'd ever spoken to Al like that, wonder what other privileges of his self-perceived rank he's felt entitled to. I wonder if

he's like Bazzer, one of those walkers who has to be the first to summit. Or does he walk at all? Are the expensive outdoor clothes he wears merely a disguise, perks of the job and all that. The kid's paid next to nothing, so is Al. A branch manager's paid not much more, because none of them are unionised, but still, the title gives him airs.

Eventually, I'd asked his advice about the gloves and he'd struck me at once as clueless, pointing me at the most expensive – a type you might wear to keep out frostbite on a trek to Everest base-camp. We were clearly working at cross-purposes here, him to maximise his profits and his bonus at the expense of his virtue, and me simply looking for the best kit for the job in hand, which was winter on a British hill – not to be underestimated of course, but not to be forgotten either that our hills were first mapped by men in tweed jackets and hobnails.

The kid seemed more clued in, agreeing with me that Sealskins were good for what I wanted, plus half the price of the others. He wore them on nights out he said, described them as awesome. He most likely got a bollocking for that when I'd gone, but he made the sale where the other guy would have lost it.

I didn't ask if Al was around for fear it would look like I fancied her, or worse that I was stalking her. But if a guy's interested in a woman, at what point do his efforts to construct a 'coincidental' meeting tip over into something more sinister? I ponder this question as I sit in the Corner Cafe, sipping on my Mocha. And I also ask myself, what is it, *exactly*, this thing with Al? It can't be as simple as the desire for romance, can it? Because it's a bit late for cultivating the love of your life, Rick.

And anyway, that was always going to be Mel, just as soon as her mother kicked the bucket and stopped interfering all the time. But now Mel has gone, while her mother festers on in some old folk's home, nasty as ever, her grandsons' inheritance disappearing at the rate of four grand a month. Is it just company you're wanting then? Is it just someone to sit with and share a Mocha now and then? Someone to treat like a queen, and buy roses for.

No, it's more than that. Like I said, mostly when a guy's drawn to a woman, he's projecting something of himself onto her, a need he doesn't even know he has, and hopefully at some point he forgets that and decides he simply likes the woman for who she really is. But what if you're wise to the fact you're projecting in the first

place, wise to the fact it's not the woman you're really interested in, initially at least, that it's something in yourself, and by getting closer to the woman you get closer to understanding yourself a little better, and all without the otherwise blinding desire to get your end away.

How about that?

Complicated, I know. And unlikely to be true.

Sorry you asked now, aren't you?

It's about six degrees in town this morning with a light rain. Middleton feels bitter and unwelcoming. The parking machine took most of my change, leaving precious little for the homeless guy sitting there trying not to catch my eye, while trying as hard as he could. He accepted my bits of shrapnel with more enthusiasm than they deserved, and he called me sir. The coppers were all I could muster in solidarity with his lot and I felt, in the “sir”, a rebuff – not from him, he was grateful for anything – but more from within myself, the distance it implied between us.

Sure, I didn't want to be sat where he was sitting, but I have never been comfortable being called “sir”.

Amid the ruins of this, my little market town, there has risen of late the paradox of a glittering high-rise that promises a “cinematic experience” and bowling, though these attractions have yet to appear. And of the quality-shopping also promised over the years of this great carbunkle’s somewhat listless construction, only a Marks and Spencer food hall has opened. It sits uneasily now like a glitzy top-hat among rags, alongside the vape-shops and the tattoo parlours, and all the charity places.

This morning the news-stands are crowing over what looks like yet another overture of war with Iran, the more right wing and tabloidy the title, the more strident and crass the headline, but whether to instil terror or glee I do not know. It will depend on your disposition I suppose. Me? My sight has narrowed of late only to those things I can see and touch, and I see only that both the social and the physical fabric of my surroundings are in tatters. Even the roads we drive are fucked, the cat's eyes gone from good long stretches of the '61 now, and the lane markings worn off. Thus I extrapolate from past trends to the inevitable conclusion that things will not be improving in the decades to come.

Meanwhile we rattle our sabres.

Middle eastern politics never makes for comfortable reading,

does it? Events seem dictated by dark powers completely beyond our knowing, and while another war played out as infotainment might be considered dramatic, even distracting from certain vexed questions of domestic and transatlantic politics, it'll be a different matter entirely when we look back in another ten years and count the cost.

And it’s certainly not going to fix anything that needs fixing at home.

Thus the New Year opens and leaves me casting around for a glimmer of hope. I have sought it in the food aisles of M&S, and among the miscellaneous outdoor paraphernalia of Campsmart, found it, albeit temporarily, in a Chicken Provençal, a pen-knife, a pair of gloves, and a walking stick. It's nearly a week now since I was on the top of a misty Pendle, feeling for a time that all was well, that I had some wind left for better things. It’s only when you come back down to earth the shadows regroup, and the doubts set in. Time I got up there again, then. There are plenty of tops to choose from, not just those around the house, but further afield in the Lakes and the Dales, and all within easy striking distance of the Beast.

So, I've bought something for my tea, browsed the novels in Heart Foundation, and O’Doires, but nothing took my eye. I bought a brew for the homeless guy and walked it back up to the carpark for him. Now I'm sitting watching people through the partially steamed up window of the Corner Cafe, all of them it seems cowed by winter and the flat murk that passes for daylight at this time of year.

But are they really? Cowed I mean. Likely some are, the homeless guy for one, that's obvious, but maybe I'm just projecting myself onto the rest. Cowed in spirit. Sure. But why, Rick? You've escaped all this now. It took you forty years but your pension, plus the interest from your investments is more now than you were bringing home as a worker. You've made it, man. You've achieved the impossible. Why then this sense of defeat?

Is it just this election business? Is it just the fall-out of those weeks and weeks trudging the streets with a bag full of Labour-party leaflets? Is it the door-knocking and all that racist bile coming at you from the doorsteps – that shocking exposure to the sense of supremacy, and entitlement of the angry-white-man who still thinks England has an empire. England, mind you. Not Britain.

Sure, it's partly all of that, but the crushing of hope seems metaphorical and abstract to me as much as it's concrete and political. So get your hope from somewhere else, Rick; you've just been wishing for all the wrong things. Hell, you're a free man and the last of your species. The next twenty years are yours to play with. So there's no use sitting here with a face like a slapped arse.

Buck up, man!

There's a guy sitting across the room reading his big-tit-red-top like it makes him some sort of intellectual or something. Others are glued to their smartphones, scrolling through their social media, while at the same time having their brains subliminally rinsed in acid, and either they're unaware of it, or they just don't care.

Do I sound like an angry old white-guy to you?

They're all so dazzled by these pocketfuls of banal distraction they're not looking up, not looking where they're going. See? there's only me staring out at the street over the rim of my coffee-cup. Only me on my own, too. Aren't I the perfect one?

Except, no... wait. Isn't that?...

Next table. A woman has just sat down. Smart overcoat, nice scarf, hair brushed out gleaming gold and lighting the place up of a sudden. Snug little beret. How cute! In this light, she'd pass for Claudia Schiffer. Hell, who dresses like that these days? So gorgeous she is, she's turning heads. Pray God she doesn't notice you. Just get your stuff together, gently... and get out of here. She probably doesn't remember you anyway.

No. Too late. And she does... remember.

Of course she remembers Rick!

She gives a surprised little twinkle and a finger-wave. All right. Be friendly. Remember how that goes? It's okay being a curmudgeon with others who deserve it, but she isn't one of them. She's likely never harmed anyone.

"Em... Lottie. Hi. What a nice surprise. You on your own?"

She nods.

I've still not heard Lottie speak, so either she's even more of an introvert than me or she's really got no voice. No one's told me she's actually without a voice, so again I don't know what the etiquette is here, though with Lottie I don't suppose there's such a thing as normal etiquette, this woman who would think nothing of grabbing a stranger's rucksack straps so he can lead her off the fell, or falling asleep on his shoulder, treating all men as her brothers, and all

women as her sisters. Yes. I know, it's admirably egalitarian, but a dangerous thing for her to be doing in times like these.

She moves tables at once, apparently eager to sit down with me. Hell, what am I supposed to do, now? My Mocha's almost gone. This is going to be really awkward. Never mind. Smile. Be open. She smiles back, shrugs cosily, takes a sip of her tea, says nothing. So, is it up to me to fill the silence?

"Em,... did you enjoy the hike up Pendle?"

Condescending Rick. Okay, but how else to break the ice? I'll have to read things here as we go along.

She nods, smiles, still says nothing.

"You go out with group a lot?"

You already know she does. Al told you she never misses a walk.

Lottie nods, takes up her cup again, wraps her hands around it, sips, turns to the window. She looks relaxed, happy. Lipstick and blusher. She's dressed up. For a trip to Middleton? You don't see that very often now. She really is leaking somewhere.

"So,... em. When's the next walk? Only Al didn't say."

She'll have to talk to me now – a nod or a shake of the head won't suffice in this instance. But instead she looks blank for a second, then reaches into her bag for a diary, flicks to the right page and shows me: *January 18th, Glasson, Cockerham. Depart Market square 09:00. £10.00.*

Still not a word, though her expression is enquiring: *is that okay, Rick? You mean you'll be there?*

I'm not sure if I'll be there or not and I guess my expression says so without really trying. But I do make a mental note.

Her writing is exquisite, perfect copperplate. Haven't seen anything like that since primary school a half century ago and more, and Miss Wishall's skill on a chalk-board. I was in love with Miss Wishall of course. I can barely hold a pen now, let alone write with one. Pens are a forgotten technology.

Why am I being taken back to this?

I sit a while, stretching out the dregs of my Mocha. Should I order another? No... I'll be wanting to pee. If there's any awkwardness it's only me that's feeling it. She's just happy to sit and look out of the window. And maybe she has a point, that most of what people say to each other is bullshit anyway. I try it for a while, but that involves settling into the other's energy, matching the rise and fall of other's chest. And no... that's unbearable.

Indecent even. I have to go. I've sat with her long enough now to be polite.

"Thanks. Well,... em. Best be going. I'll see you then perhaps... on the Glasson Walk." I stand. She stands. I'm wondering why, but then she hugs me, a lovely warm press of a hug, then sits back down, beams warmth, finger-waves me goodbye, twinkles beautifully.

It was the shock of it, that embrace I mean, and the warmth of her, coming out of the blue like that, the unaffected innocence of it. It takes someone like Lottie to point out certain things sometimes, and maybe that's why I'm feeling the filthy scum of decades come welling up to the surface now as I walk back to the beast. I've not cried for a long time, probably not since my mother died, and I'm not exactly crying now, though something is forcing the wet into my eyes, just short of spilling.

But I know what it is I'm missing now, what it is I'm dealing with, and it's obvious really, so obvious I couldn't see it. All it took was Lottie's unaffected embrace, given with trust and without expectation. What is it?

I'm missing my wife and my kids.

I'm missing my family.

Sure, none of that was my fault, and nothing I can do about it now, but that's just the way things work out sometimes, isn't it?

Chapter Nine

Not your fault, Rick? Is that what you're really thinking? Well, Mel didn't exactly sign up for what you turned into, did she? You set out as a young professional with good prospects, even though, like most, she'd no idea what it was you did, even when you explained it. She just glazed over like everyone else, and changed the subject.

Simple. Everyone wants it simple.

You were a white shirt and tie sort of guy, which is all that mattered to her back then, and she signed up with you for a chance at a nice house and kids, and the financial stability to see them through university, then a gentle retirement of knitting and occasional nights out, and holidays in a cottage by some quiet Loch in the Highlands. It's what you wanted too, still do in a way – sounds idyllic that quiet Loch, if the Scots will still have me. It was just the union that lit a fuse under you, and a natural lead into all that left wing political stuff.

How did that start again? Well, when the assistant shop-steward at the factory retired, and no one volunteered to take his place, you thought, *that's not right*, so you put your hand up out of a sense of collective duty, then the management wouldn't walk all over the lot of you come pay-round time. Next thing you know you're sitting head to head with psychologically astute HR arseholes, negotiating pay-rises no one's ever happy with. You get them two percent, they want three; you get them three percent, they want four, not realising without you they'd likely have got nothing at all, and had their terms of employment tightened up till their pips squeaked for good measure.

It kept you away from home at nights and plenty of weekends too. All those meetings, training courses, conferences, seminars, the downside being, even with a PhD, you never made it across the threshold to middle management, did you? Technical specialist. That was the most they allowed you, Red Rick, the commie bastard. But that was fine. It was war, and you enjoyed it.

Wait a minute: how can an introvert be a bastard?

Easy... he can be a psychopath.

I admit I can be a little intense at times, especially in my writings, even prone to having conversations with myself and imaginary others, but psychopath? Sorry, I'm not having that.

Theory. There's a lot of political theory on the left. Have you noticed? while there's nothing much on the right, beyond various expositions on power and greed. If you weren't so shit-scared of the left, on account of your tabloid habits you might like to look it up some time, though it will involve reading some actual books. Marx, Engels... Trotsky and all that lot. And that's just the old stuff. There's been a lot of water under the bridge since then, a lot of history.

It was interesting for a time, picking up on the theory, but with all due respect to the intellectuals who still study, and write in that vein – I mean, about a fairer, more equitable society, and the elimination of want and all that – my theory after a lifetime of observation on the subject is that it falls foul of basic human psychological reality which, by and large, is neither intellectual, ecological nor egalitarian in its inclinations. Indeed it doesn't think much at all.

It's more primitive, greedy, easily led and, like Bazzer, will always want to be first to the summit, and it doesn't matter how good things are, people will always find something to grumble about. It's about the competition, you see? the acquired status, even if that only means, when we're both languishing in the Gulag – you angle to get yourself just one more mouldy old potato than me, because then you've still won... see?

Pathetic isn't it? But that's what we are.

Anyway, there's no summit today for Baz to charge at. It's a flat circular from the little port of Glasson, on the Lancashire coast, down to the vast marsh at Cockerham. Then it's back via the coastal path, and it's all incredibly beautiful in a big sky sort of way. The tide's in and there's a razor wind coming off the bay, trying to flay the skin off my face. Baz is wearing a big Russian hat with ear-flaps. It's got a hammer and sickle badge pinned to it, which I take is meant to be ironic, especially given England's recent dramatic swing into the ultra-blue. He's in good spirits, though his eyes are bloodshot and he looks hung-over.

"Fuckin' raw innit, Mick?"

"Em... it's Rick. Cold, yes, Baz."

It's late morning now and that gorgeous soft winter sunlight is making the greensward by the old red-stoned abbey ruins look almost summery. Baz has been up and down the line a bit, striking out with the lead-group at first, but slinking back, then up again

like he's been running out of steam and struggling not to lose face. Does he not see how ridiculous that makes him? I want to tell him to chill out, that no one cares. Just relax man, walk with me. Be my friend.

Well... not my friend exactly, but you know what I mean.

Most of the group do seem friendly enough, now, without actually going so far as to engage me in conversation. They just nod their greetings, but then that's how it usually is; it takes people a while to settle in around introverts like me. But, unlike Lottie, I do speak, and I do respect body space. I can even handle small-talk and everything – it's just that I always leave it to others to get things going.

There is this one frightful old battle-axe, though, who seems hostile for some reason, at least given the daggers I've been getting from her all morning. She reminds me of Mel's mother, and I wondered if that's how she knows me, a friend of the family or something, but I can't place her. It would be a pity to drag all that into the group dynamics, and if it's true then I'll not be spending much time with them after today.

Anyway...

"You okay, Baz?"

"Yea, sure. Bad curry last night or something."

"Ah... right. Commiserations. Nothing worse."

Laura hasn't shown up today, but Charlie of the grumbly knees has – Chazzer, as Bazzer calls him. He's a stork-like octogenarian with a bent though rather stately gait, and an upright shock of thick, snowy hair. Al had the good sense to ask him to backstop as usual, as he struck me as a bit of a martinet, and would have resented my taking over his role. Hierarchies, you see? We self-organise, based on personality type and body language. Me? Who knows where I fit these days. I'm just a ghost, man. I'm floating. Lost. But at least while we're on the trail, I'm enjoying the day, pacing out with my new stick in the sunshine, and braced against the wind, gaining confidence and fitness for when I begin striking out a little more on my own. Spring, I reckon. I'm making a list of hills I want to do, some old, some new.

For now though I'm playing midfield, Al way up front somewhere with her gaggle of wannabes, the grumbly Chazzer and his knobbly knees way back on his own, and proudly sporting his walkie-talkie. (status symbol see?) Meanwhile, Lottie's been

working her way down from one little clique to another like she's running out of steam too, though I know she isn't. She'll wind up with Chazzer, eventually and I'm sure her lack of conversation will suit him just fine.

It puzzles me why so many of his generation are angry all the time. I mean, there he is, in his eighties and still on his feet, still out in the fresh air. Pension. Own home. NHS (what's left of it) at his beck and call – everything the kids these days will never have at his age. I wonder what it will take to make some people truly happy.

You mean like you Rick?

Yea, okay, but I'm trying. All right. I'll get there.

It's interesting to watch how Lottie will settle in with someone for a while, and they'll feel the need to fill the silence between them with chat, like I did in the cafe. Then things get awkward because she never says anything back, so they get fed up with her, and she'll pick up on that and move on. She's not autistic then – autism tends not to pair with empathy. And anyone who can write as neatly as she can isn't lacking in intelligence, plus the way she was dressed and made up that time I saw her in town, she's not lacking a certain clued-in femininity either. But if she's sensitive to the approval of others, how come she keeps turning up in the face of their awkwardness? Could it be she's just looking for someone she can simply *be* with. Someone else like her. If that's true, she'll be looking for a long time because, so far as I can tell, she's unique.

She's paused up the way there by a kissing gate, looks like she's waiting for me and Baz to catch up, so it'll be our turn to deal with her soon. It's Al I really want to talk to, but that gaggle of groupies always shield her from the lowly likes of me – all of them loyal lieutenants vying for the mantle of “chosen one” – deputy walk leader – except they'd rather not get involved in the planning, which Al seems to enjoy. So much for team Al and Rick then. That didn't last long did it?

As for Lottie if there's any depth to her, a mere mortal's never going to fathom it. Maybe Bazzer has some clues.

"So, what's the story with Lottie, then, Baz?"

"Lottie? Well... quite a looker, eh? I mean for her age."

Predictable enough response.

"But does she... speak at all? I've never heard her speak, and it's not like she's shy."

"Oh, she's definitely not shy, mate." He punches my arm

playfully, implies he has more knowledge of Lottie than anyone else, possibly carnal, but I'm too old to be believing that sort of thing. Baz is a bit of a braggart, and would have us believe in his success with all the ladies in the group, and I do mean *all* of them, including the battle-axe. But this only makes him seem more lonely, and childish. There's only Al he's ever been with, I'm sure. And that ended badly, because he drinks too much, and... possibly other things I'm not aware of yet.

He nods in dreamy contemplation. "Wouldn't mind a roll in the hay with her, that's for sure."

Yea right. Come on, mate. Grow up.

"I mean... ever heard her speak?"

"Nah, weird that. But women are all the same with a bag over their heads though in't they? And being dumb like, stops her pecking?"

"Nagging you mean?"

"Yea. Nag, don't they? Women. Peck, peck, peck. All the fuckin' time."

I presume we're talking about Al now.

Mel used to peck at me, but only when she felt I wasn't pulling my weight, which I have to admit was most of the time, or rather too much time with my head immersed in matters other than domestic.

"Suppose so, Baz."

"Damned right."

I've noticed the guys are scared of her, actually. Lottie, I mean – especially the married ones – maybe because of the easy way she has with them, and it makes them embarrassed and angsty, braced against what they imagine their wives might say. And the women? Well, they're not hostile exactly... more watchful. I've no doubt in primitive times, Lottie would have been considered special enough to be taken out into the swamp one night by the priesthood, and drowned. Thus the spirits would be appeased, and social awkwardness addressed in one go.

We catch her up at the kissing gate. The spray from the sea is flying in here, stinging a bit. I need a hat like Bazzer's - another trip to Campsmart, then – but the gloves are awesome, just like the kid said. She's looking out at the Plover Scar light, a little way offshore, seems fascinated by it, or maybe it's the sunshine turning to long runs of gold on the wave-crests. She smiles at our approach. That's

something she's really good at, smiling, and maybe if more of us spent less time talking, we could all put on a better smile.

Bazzer sets off at a cracking pace then. He's no more idea how to be around Lottie than I have, and would clearly rather I had the pleasure of it instead of him. She watches him go, her brow furrowed momentarily in puzzlement. I decide on a different approach, assume she has no need for words, either spoken or listened to, so I vow not to speak, and I resist the urge to fill the void with bullshit. Instead, I kind of hook her in with my eye. She gives the faintest twinkle of understanding, falls into step, and we settle down to a mutually acceptable pace, settle into one another's energies, so to speak. With Lottie it's all about body language.

So relax, Rick. Don't give off those edgy vibes. Be like Lottie. Chill.

Meanwhile, the air is alive with the sound of birds, just that terrifying monolith of the Heysham nuclear power station across the sparkling bay to spoil the view. I think of Chernobyl, and the transience of all things.

Interesting, that thought, about how Lottie would have been ripe for sacrifice. Is that really how the ancients dealt with social anomalies? And are we any different now? I don't suppose we are. We've simply dispensed with the pretence of ritual, that's all. And in the world that's coming, people like Lottie are going to have a hard time, no one able to see what's precious in them, no one willing to simply let them be and find a way to be with them.

Plus, of course, a society's definition of what is or is not socially acceptable tends to narrow when it's the psychopaths who are in charge.

Chapter Ten

So, we're back at Glasson now and I've bought myself a brew from the Lockeeper's Rest, this being a sort of snack-shack by the main basin which, just now, is glittering gorgeously in the low winter sunlight. I'd offered to buy Lottie one but she declined with a tight little shake of the head and a hugging gesture that told me she was feeling the cold. We'd stuck together the rest of the way round the circuit, and so quiet she was it was like she wasn't there. She didn't talk at all, of course, and I managed to keep my trap shut too and, all told, I felt stupidly satisfied with myself she preferred my company instead of gravitating further down the line to that grizzly old fart Chazzer, who's still preening over there, by the way, with his walkie-talkie. *Over*.

But she breaks off as suddenly as she closes in, I mean once she's done with you, and that can be a bit of a wrench after you've got used to her queer presence. I feel lighter, but a bit emptier now as I watch her climb back on the bus to get warm.

I suppose it is a little on the cold side, but I'm well layered up and feeling the benefit of the blood in my veins now. It's good to be out in the sun, even if there's no heat in it. It's the light, man. We really crave the light at this time of year. Meanwhile, Bazzer's found a can of lager in his rucksack and he's sitting apart, by the basin, getting his fix. A few of the others are sitting out on the benches, having bought teas and chip-butties, and settled into what I suppose are their usual cliques, while I'm still kept a bit at arm's length. I suppose it doesn't help I've been told in the past my face relaxes into a bit of a grump-mouth, and people aren't sure if I'm approachable, fear rebuff and all that. Truth be told I mostly prefer it as such, but it's still good to see a large group of mixed bods regularly getting together like this, and getting on.

"So Rick, how goes it?"

This is Al, suddenly mounting the bench beside me, astride it, like it's a horse.

"Em, good thanks."

"You know Glasson?"

"Yea. Used to come here a lot as a kid."

"Me too. Simple pleasures in those days. Mum, Dad, picnic on Sundays in the Morris Minor. Hasn't changed much, has it?"

"Not much, no."

Except nowadays, mum and dad couldn't have aspired to a Morris Minor.

"So... how did you get to hear about the walk? I was going to give you some dates last time but I forgot, and I've not seen you..."

"Oh... I bumped into Lottie in town, and she told me."

"She *told* you?"

I can tell by the look on Al's face, this would be major news. "Well, not *told* exactly. I asked if you were all going out again some time, and she pointed to the details in her diary. No, I've never heard her speak. I mean, I'm assuming she doesn't speak at all. Is that right?"

Al pauses, considers how best to answer. "As far as I can tell. Not spoken for years, they say, and certainly not while she's been coming out with us."

"So... she used to speak. But something happened, and she stopped?"

"That's the story. Still, she seems to like you."

"Lottie seems to like everyone."

She laughs, but there's an edge to it. "Not *everyone*, but she's sweet and I know what you mean. Anyway. Here's our walk programme. We're going to have to sting you for subs I'm afraid."

"Subs?"

"Club secretary's been moaning about it."

"You have a club secretary?"

"Molly, over there. Yellow jacket. Face that would sour milk."

"Oh,... *her*. She's been looking disapprovingly at me all morning. That would explain it. Not paid my subs, eh? No wonder she hates me. So... how much?"

"Tenner, annually."

A tenner hardly seems worth the trouble collecting, and certainly not worth the venom Molly's been projecting at me all day. But it's more than the subs of course, trivial though they are. It's that same old mouldy potato thing. We're all in the gulag here, but she gets two and I get one, and until I've paid my subs, I'm not accepting my proper place in the hierarchy, and the priests have a way of dealing with people like me.

"Pays for photocopying," explains Al. "Plus tea and biscuits at the AGM."

"You hold an Annual General Meeting?"

"Sure do."

I'm liking the sound of this less and less, so check out the leaflet. "Oh, no, look, I'm sorry, but I'm not joining any walking group that calls itself the Autumn Tints."

She puts on her best tongue-in-cheek pleading voice. "Oh, go on, Rick. We need more men. And besides I won't let you back on the bus if you don't officially join, so you'll have to walk home."

"Well, I don't know... put it that way..."

She flutters her eyelashes theatrically. "Plus I'll sleep with you if you join."

"Eh? Oh, well, okay. In that case, I'm definitely in."

Wow, that was fast. Was it a joke? Yes, of course it was. She didn't actually *mean* it, though she's picking up on your awkwardness and your blushes now, and wondering if she's embarrassed you both by misreading your sense of humour, and assuming – you know – that you actually have one.

"But you mark my words," I tell her, in my most imperious tone. "Come the next AGM, I'll be proposing a name change and I don't care what anyone thinks."

Okay, well done, Rick, and nicely saved.

Cue tart comeback: "Really? Taking on airs already? Well, what name would you suggest then?"

"I don't know, but you can warn the committee, I'll be thinking about it. That'll get them worried."

"Be careful what you say, or you might get yourself elected to that committee."

"Oh, you wouldn't want me. I'm an old union negotiator. I might come across as a bit on the quiet side, but get me round a table and I'll wipe the floor with the lot of you. Even Molly."

She laughs, leans close suddenly, hand on my arm. "I'd pay to see that."

She settles down properly on the bench, then slides over, closes in like she's a secret to share. She takes a breath, wondering how best to phrase it, like she's worried I might take offence. "Just... be careful around Lottie, eh?"

"Oh? You're going to have to explain that remark. I was trying to get her story out of Bazzer..."

She stiffens as usual at mention of his name. "What's he said? Bazzer doesn't know anything."

We look over to where he's sitting, huddled up in his Russian

hat, a little tragic, sipping on his beer. We pause a while in contemplation of that, but Bazzer's another subject entirely, and I suppose we'll get around to him eventually.

I tell her, "I can understand how a certain kind of man might home in on a woman like Lottie, thinking she'd be an easy lay."

"Well there's that. But that's not what I was meaning exactly. I know you're not like that. I mean, you're not like that, are you Rick?"

"No. I just want to avoid putting my foot in it."

"Don't worry, seems to me you're already doing it."

"Putting my foot in it?"

"No... *not* putting it... in it."

"But there's more to her. What are you not telling me?"

"It's a long story. Most of it rumour, probably not true. Tell you some other time." She checks her watch. "Better get everyone together. Driver's got a darts match and doesn't want to be late back." She stands up, squeezes my shoulder half way between encouragement and sympathy. "Can you send your subs to Molly by Paypal? Her email address is on the form. She means no harm."

"Who Lottie?"

"No, Molly."

She gives a quick blast on the Acme Thunderer she wears around her neck, calls for attention. *Ten minutes before the bus leaves, so finish up everyone and climb aboard.*

I suspect she's wrong about Molly. I've met women like her before, and they can be really nasty. Best thing to be said about them is if you can get them on your side you're unstoppable. Otherwise, forget it. Women like Al though, leaders like Al... they impress me. As for Lottie, she's still an enigma, could be a savant, or could just be mad and sad, though definitely not bad... Baz was at least right about that.

I take my brew over and sit with him for a bit.

He's far away, looks up, welcomes me in. "All right there, Nick?"

"Em... it's Rick. Yea, fine. Bus leaves in ten."

"I heard. That damned whistle of hers near always splits my fuckin' head open."

"Like being back at school, eh?"

"Aye well. That's it with Al. She was a teacher. Forgets sometimes she's not."

"A teacher?" And there was me thinking she'd always been a

minimum wage slave. So, I wonder what happened there then?

"Primary," says Baz. "Little kids. Wouldn't think that would be much trouble would you? Did her head in though. Not the kids. It was management. Inspections. Fuckin' people innit. Always fuckin' people. Nut-jobs getting' up themselves and lordin' it over others. Whenever did all the fuckin' nut-jobs work out how to get themselves in charge, Nick?"

Good question Baz. And how did we let them? Were they really so clever, or could we just not be bothered with running the show ourselves?

So Al got out, and now she's working in a shop, biding her time until she can get her pension. That's her story, part of it at least.

The bus rumbles to life, the others begin to make a move. "Sounds like we'd best get going, Comrade."

"Eh?"

"Your hat. Russian. Hammer and sickle."

He laughs at that. "Oh aye. Genuine article this, you know? Berlin, '89. That was a crazy time. Swapped it off this East German border-guard for a couple of beers, and a tin of Heinz bangers and beans. Week before that we'd've been starin' at each other down the barrel of a gun. Next thing we're best pals."

"You saw the wall come down?"

"Well, didn't see it actually coming down. It was all over when I got there. I was stationed there for a bit. You know, with the army, like."

He struggles to his feet, looks a bit wobbly. Then he bursts into song, a fine voice too. It takes me aback:

"*Days in the sun and the tempered wind and the air like wine, And you drink and you drink till you're drunk on the joy of living."* He thumps my arm: "What do you say, Nick?"

"Well, it's not much like wine today, Baz – more like a raggedy-arsed beer that's been left in the freezer too long, but I know what you mean. Now, come on, let's get on the bus before they go without us."

Under Al's watchful eye I see him into a seat, sit with him, pin him by the window to stop him wobbling into the aisle. The tune of that snatch of song is like a key in my brain looking for a lock to turn. Finally it comes: Ewan MacColl, The Joy of Living.

I was always a MacColl fan – no surprises there – and I want to ask Bazzer about it, how come he knows that song well enough to

sing it, because the working-man folk-lyrics of MacColl aren't exactly the sort of thing a Brexiteering Tory Gammon would normally be heard singing at the top of their lungs.

"Hey, Baz..."

But he's asleep already. I settle back for the journey, wondering how it is I could have done something so overtly friendly for a guy I wouldn't ordinarily want to be friendly with. Then I tell myself his presence spares me the company of either Al or Lottie, from whom I could do with a bit of breathing space – Lottie because she troubles me of a sudden, and I really don't know what to make of her, and Al... well, Al because I think I'm in trouble there, but of a different sort entirely.

Trouble? Yes, because I like her. I mean, I *really* like her. And in my warped frame of mind, I'm beginning to develop more and more this fantasy of the duck-down and Al and me under it, and it being what Al wants too. It's not sex. Trust me, get to my age and you really don't think about sex as the goal in a relationship any more so much as the joshing and the cuddling. So why not just go for it Rick? Well, whether she and Bazzer know it, or like it, or not, and in spite of whatever god-awful mess he's made of things between them, she's still clearly Bazzer's girl.

That's why not.

Chapter Eleven

It's still just about light when I'm pulling back onto the drive-way up-bit-Drinkhouse. There's a mobster-black Range-Rover parked on the verge across the road, in a little pull-in that's just big enough to take a car of that size. Walkers often use it when they're heading off up the hill, but this vehicle looks too clean for this time of year to be owned by any mortal being. Assuming it's not actually the local mob, or the secret service being ironic, it screams: Corporate.

I'm told by comrades in the movement that if the security services were indeed actively keeping tabs on me, I wouldn't know. But, same as everyone else these days, they probably contract-out low level stuff to private numpties who aren't as smart, plus it doesn't matter if the aim is more to intimidate than to gather intel. After that civil disobedience thing, I was bound-over to keep the peace for a year, and that's pretty much done now. I've written nothing political for anyone to get upset about, other than this – and at the time of writing it's obviously not "out there" yet – plus I've attended no meetings, so I really don't know why they'd be interested in me at all. This isn't the first time it's happened though, so my paranoia doesn't seem entirely unfounded.

Then, from the moor at the back of the house there comes the buzzing of a substantial drone, flying about roof height. It seems to be doing a loop of the property, then the camera swivels onto me and does a tracking shot before settling down on the verge behind the Range-Rover. A guy steps out wearing a Hi-Vis jacket, doesn't look at me, packs the thing into a crate in the back. He's a big guy, expressionless, but he doesn't look like a copper.

I'd take a picture of him but I don't have a phone, and my camera's indoors. It's the fact he doesn't speak that unsettles me, that and his apparent confidence I haven't the balls to challenge him. I want to hurl a rock at the car, see how he reacts to that. But what if he's just a guy from the water company, checking on the reservoir? They must do that with drones now. They do everything with drones. So ask him, Rick.

Like, who are you, man?

I make to cross the road, but he gets back in the car and speeds off south, definitely something shifty about him.

Okay, so that's weird. But in the absence of anything firmer to go on,

let's assume it's just a guy from the water company.

Why?

Because we sleep more soundly that way.

But what about that time, when I first moved in and took a walk across the moor, up Black Hill? I was tailed by a drone that evening, unless it was just someone doing an aerial survey, or some kid with a warped sense of humour. Sure, drones are everywhere now. Relax, Rick. Do you need to see the doctor or something? Are you suffering from PTSD? It was a long road you travelled, a long political campaign that ended in disaster. You're bound to be exhausted and jittery.

I'm hoping Bazzer made it home okay. He seemed perky enough after his snooze on the bus, and so far as I know he'd only drunk that one beer in the day. He was driving, though. I watched him climb into an old Passat on the market square car-park, and pull away, and not too steadily either. It's troubling me that, since I only live a little up the road from him – I mean, I'm assuming he lives in Grindleton – I should perhaps offer to drive him next time. But that pins me down, and I still don't want him knowing where I live, and maybe calling at some inconvenient hour, half cut, and vomiting on my nice new bamboo-laminate flooring.

You wouldn't be complaining if it was Al though, would you? Drunk or sober. No, then you'd be all like: "Come in, Al. Fancy a brew? I'll just put another log on the fire. Can I take your coat?"

Reason? Be honest now, you want Al to let you shag her. You wouldn't shag Bazzer, even if it turned out he was a woman.

Weird sky, isn't it? It has a greenish tinge, full cloud-cover but the base of it is quite high, still. I can just make out the coast, but there are curtains of rain sweeping the plain, and they look heavy. Wind's picking up too and the oaks that keep the house company are starting to fidget. Rain's heading this way, for sure. I secure the beast and fasten myself indoors, check the windows, empty the de-humidifiers, batten down the hatches.

Email from Rachel Read. Rachel? Oh *that* Rachel. She was the last woman, indeed the only woman I've ever made love with, I mean since Mel... didn't work out too well though. She was sexy and ever so patient, but... well... you get out of practise don't you?

Anyway, there's a demonstration outside parliament, something about the NHS and am I in? Email deleted. The NHS is great, it's a miracle of socialism, but it's well and truly fucked, picked at by the

vultures of Medicorp Inc. My advice? Keep fit, don't get sick, or old. In fact, I delete that mail account altogether, create another, update my online banking profile, my Paypal, then pay Molly my subs while I'm at it. Hell, Rachel. It's not worth it, girl. Find yourself a nice guy. Have some fun. Stay out of trouble, or they'll be coming for you.

The rain hits hard as darkness comes on, a full throated roar against the windows, driven in by a stiff easterly. I check the Met-office online, and they reckon it'll last the clock round. So I run a bath, soak myself a while, microwave some tea, watch crazy-cat videos on You-tube until my eyes bleed, then go to bed. Crazy cat videos are about the only thing these days that can make me laugh, and since laughing is good for you, you've got to get it any way you can.

I plan on sleeping late, but I dream of strange black birds circling the house, looking for a way in – I presume all on account of that creepy drone incident – and I dream Lottie is tossing pebbles up at my window, trying to warn me of their presence. I'm scared for her, I mean out there with those birds because they've got long phallic beaks, but I don't want to let her in because she's wearing a snug-fitting jump suit that shows me all her curves, including a preposterously erotic camel's toe, and I'm afraid of desiring her like you would any normal woman.

Well you would, wouldn't you?

So I'm drifting in and out of sleep after that and imagining I can hear voices downstairs – nothing distinct, just a murmur. This has happened before and I'm wondering if it's ghosts from when the place used to be a pub. I mean, I've no particular beliefs either way on this – ghosts, that is – and if they are ghosts, it's fair enough. I just wish they'd keep their voices down, because there's someone upstairs trying to sleep. Anyway, I wind up in the kitchen at 3:00 a.m. making a brew. And then the phone's ringing.

It doesn't ring very often, even in daytime, and when it does it's always a wrong number. The kids wouldn't call me any more, not even if it was an emergency.

I pick up.

There's a click, then a wall of noise. There can't be more than a dozen fax machines left in the whole world now, and my number is being mistaken for one of them. That means I'll have to disconnect the line every night, or it'll keep disturbing me.

Unless that's the idea... disturbing me.

Paranoid Rick.

I take the brew back to bed, snuggle under the duck-down, make a womanly shape from the spare pillow to curl my arm around. It does the trick and I drift off until dawn, wake to the sound of rain and an empty house.

Maybe I should get a cat for company.

Allergic to their dander, Rick. Remember?

Okay, okay. A woman then.

Good luck with that one.

Mid morning, and still raining. By now all this water will be lifting the river levels down on the plain. There'll have been floods in the usual places, overtopping defences considered adequate for a century only a couple of years ago. We've always had rain in Lancashire, famous for it, but the volume being put down now is on a different scale. Climate models have long predicted it, and it looks like we're on track. Some places will burn. Others will drown. Looks like we'll drown.

Email from Molly Barnes, acknowledging receipt of membership fee, plus a very long, bonkers introduction to the group that no one's ever going to read, then several attachments, one concerned with risk assessment, another being a personal injury disclaimer I am to sign and return forthwith, and a repeat of the walk programme Al's already given me.

Fuck's sake, Molly.

I delete the lot, and shall deny all knowledge if asked.

Risk assessment? Disclaimer? I remember one of reasons we used to climb mountains was for the risk and the reliance upon one's self to avoid accident. It's like the key to paradise, to the joy of living. The Autumn Tints are becoming a pain in the arse, and were it not for Al and Baz and Lottie, I'd be kicking them into touch.

The joy of living? Where did that come from?

Ah... it was that line of song that burst out of Bazzer, the Ewan MacColl song.

Along with Benny Rothman, MacColl was one of the original trespassers on Kinder Scout in '32. They faced down a line of keepers and cops, fought a running battle. But they didn't just do it for a lark.

You've got to take yourself back to that period, to an oppressed people, starving and unemployed, and the rich owning the hills as

well as the mills, and telling the poor they couldn't go there, that the fresh-air and freedom of the land wasn't for the likes of them. All such struggles are born out of tyranny, and those guys decided to do something about it. But bear in mind it took till the year 2000 for the right to roam to be enshrined in law. That's nearly seventy years of pressure from lefties like me, just so you can take a walk up the moors without getting beaten up by a toff's lackey.

Now it's not the hills that have been stolen. It's your future, but don't look at me, man. I'm out. Too late anyway, remember? You've got thirty years, and then you’re done.

And I mean *done*.

Chapter Twelve

Noon, and the rain pauses for breath, first glimmer of watery light breaking through, so I take the beast into town, get coffee and a hat, but not from Campsmart; the supermarket's fine for both. The roads are pretty much awash, deep puddles formed by run-off from the meadows and overwhelmed drains bursting water now like geysers from the manholes. The sewers have bubbled up too and there's a faecal smell hanging over everything, like we're already drowning in our own shit.

I'm sitting in the café, watching people. Middleton's always felt like home to me, naturally enough, on account of how I was born near here, went to school here, rode the train to Manchester every day from here while I was doing the metrology thing to death at university. Then I commuted from here like a zombie up and down the M61 for the next thirty five years. But when I look out at those crowds on the carpark and clustered around the checkouts, it strikes me as weird I don't know any of them and they don't know me, nor do any of us *want* to know one another. We all just get our stuff and go. Is this what we have become then? A series of bleeps and clicks and swipes of machine input, in exchange for vegetables and junk?

Frankly, there's no soul in it, no dignity, and if that's the case then fine; we're no great loss to the planet are we? If the function of the universe is always to evolve into something higher, it's hit a dead end with us. We showed great promise for a time, raising civilisations and culture and all that, but we went off the rails somewhere. I'm sure some creatures will survive what's coming, and maybe that'll be enough to get things back into some sort of self-regulating balance. If consciousness does arise again on earth it won't be for tens of millions of years, which is pretty much a clean slate and a chance for the next dominant species to try another way of looking at things. I suppose what I'm trying to say is that without a deeper sense of the mystery of life, everything we do looks, feels, and probably *is* futile.

It's different in the hills though. That's where you feel the mystery, and the sheer joy of living most profoundly. You don't feel it in a supermarket.

There's no dignity in any of this.

I think back to last night – not the dream of Lottie, though I

can't quite escape it. It's more that imagined murmur of conversation from downstairs, what would have been the bar of the pub, back in the thirties, and maybe a few centuries, off and on, before then. It's probably just the wind in the gutters or something, when it blows from a particular direction, but if it's not then one of those voices could be my grandfather who was known to walk up to the pub from Grindleton of a summer's eve. His little dog would walk with him, but return home on its own as he talked and drank late into the night with his compatriots.

I don't know if it's a comfort to feel him near like that or not, but it happens from time to time when I'm doing the family history thing. You hit upon a fresh piece of information and it opens up a door between you and them. You get a strong image of a person, even if no likeness exists, and you sense your ancestors drawing near. I suppose it's like that in ancient communities too, this reverence for the ancestors and the sense of duty in keeping their memories alive down the generations. And then it's always the case that certain spirits – if that's the right word – seem to take a special interest in you.

And that would be Annie, I suppose.

Great uncle Charlie must have known the Drinkhouse too, maybe even came up for one last bevy before reporting for duty in 1914. He went a long way to die, lies now in Kalamaria, Greece, and, so far as I know, no one's ever visited. I keep meaning to go out there myself, but I've no passport now and the convoluted renewal process puts me off and, as an introvert, I don't know anyone well enough or respectable enough who'd sign for me. No bother. I was never much of a traveller anyway.

Annie was his wife, and I have a picture of her taken around 1915. She'd be about twenty two then, was left flat broke when he died, finally shipped out to Oz in '23 because there was nothing left for the working class by then. Some stayed and fought in the various socialist and communist movements, which eventually gave birth to the Labour Party, while others quit for the colonies in despair. The colonies weren't a cushy number by any means, but at least there was the dignity of work and bread and a better chance at life. A beautiful woman, this mill-girl from Blackburn, she found herself another man and the pair of them pioneered land in the west, all of which I imagine has now been razed by fire.

These are big stories, but no point to any of them that I can see,

other than to me – while I sit here trying to ignore that all-pervading smell of shit – that their lives are now condensed and embellished by imagination into myth, yet one whose meaning defies analysis. It's like drawing together all the disparate threads of an unknown story and linking them back to yourself, wondering what the hell those tough Edwardians would think of me now, this angsty Boomer, stressing over some homeless ne'er-do-well on the carpark, and lamenting how all the decent shops he remembers on the high-street, have now closed.

All you've ever known is peace and plenty, Rick. All they ever knew was hardship and war. And I mean WAR, a thing that took their kin, and the kin of their neighbours, cast a pall of mourning over the nation, and was not merely played out as infotainment on TV.

Come on, you made the best of the times you were born into.

But did I? Did I really?

Well what else were you supposed to do, man? Start a revolution?

Her face haunts me, actually. I mean Annie... the poise of her in that studio photograph. It's both elegant, yet bold, shoulders back, defiant, as if already feeling the future settling upon her, and sensing the degree of grit required of her. She lived a long life, retired to Perth, died in '89. Charlie's in the picture too, in uniform, maybe one of the last times they saw each other. That uniform ages him. He looks forty yet could only have been twenty-five and, unlike hers, his expression is clouded, like he's already a ghost. I touch his name once a year on that war memorial in Grindleton, leave my little cross with his name on it, but it's never him I see or feel, at times, drawing near; it's his wife. Annie. They had a child too, which intrigues me, but that's another story.

Anyway, all of that was in the murmurings in the bar I heard last night, yet did not really hear, and only now is it filtering through the channels of imagination, forming itself into pictures and words. What are they saying, that young couple, as they look out at me from that photograph?

You're the only one who knows, the only one who can tell our story.

So what if I tell it, like I'm telling it here? There are more who have lain unknown down the millennia because those who remembered them were not themselves remembered, and the long chain of being was broken. And who's going to remember me?

This is getting maudlin.

Let's get out of here, Rick.

I head back out to the Beast and sit a while. Hell, the loneliness is biting hard today. Maybe I shouldn't have retired from the job so early. They certainly used to keep me busy at the lab, though more latterly in the defence of budgets rather than the work I used to enjoy, the actual business of measuring stuff. But that commute was killing me, and the bastards were pecking my head every five minutes, like I knew the answer to everything, and time was ticking. And the older you get the more you realise you know nothing at all.

The weather looks calmer now. The Met office suggests a twelve hour window before the next rains, though not as heavy as the last. I decide to drive up to the Coppice, leave the Beast there and walk home over the hill. I'll walk back for it tomorrow.

Yes, I know: The Coppice. That's where Al lives.

Chapter Thirteen

It's only a couple of miles out of town to where the moors rise suddenly, but it's already a world away from the black brick and busted render of Middleton, all of it erased now by lush pasture, and then the khaki moor above all that with its cap of boiling blue-grey cloud. Old reservoirs that once served the long-gone mills add a touch of lake-country to the dell in which the Coppice nestles. They reflect the cold, flat light between bare trees. In the summer months it has a pastoral beauty about it, but in winter something daunting and more deeply emotive, verging on despair. But even in winter these cottages and the greens remain an oasis of charm, though this picturesque quality means the Coppice is a pig of a bottleneck on weekends, and better avoided.

Quiet today though.

Which of these places will be Al's, I wonder.

I park away from view, under the trees, tog up, make sure I've got the house-key, then set off. I might have been able to identify Al's property had I taken any notice of what car she drives, though she's no doubt in town still, selling walking gear for that obnoxious cretin who snarls at the sight of bum-crack.

But that's not why I'm here, is it... to stalk Al?

No, really. I'm here to walk.

Maybe I'll see her tomorrow, accidentally – when I return for the beast.

Oh, really?

Accidentally, Rick?

Maybe I should have just gone to Campsmart for my hat. But I didn't want to see her then, I wanted to keep a safe space. Still do. Or don't. Hell, I don't know, it's a complex situation and only walking's going to clarify it.

No, Rick, walking never clarifies a question, remember? It just provides the means of transcending it, of putting things back into their proper proportions – so you never have to answer it, I mean.

I've not gone far when I come across an old Passat, similarly sequestered under the trees, a trooper of a vehicle bearing the scrapes and dings of long service. I note the front bumper is held together by a patchwork of gaffer tape and it strikes me I've seen that car before. It's Bazzers. It also strikes me there's not much room

for a visitor to leave a vehicle down by the cottages, so if someone were visiting Al, for example, or maybe even staying overnight, this is where you'd leave your car.

The revelation has me feeling a little empty, and I'm going to have to work on that during the walk. After Mel, I didn't give up the job, and the Movement and pretty much all hope for a brighter future, to go stumbling back to my teens, and mooning over some damned woman. If there's a point to my life, I thought, then at least I've got the next twenty years to discover it. And this loneliness is just getting in the way, like a wall that needs demolishing, so I can move on and enjoy being in my own skin again, without living through someone else's eyes all the time. I mean, come on, Rick, you're nearly sixty years old; *fuck's sake, man!*

It's a steep climb to begin, until, at about a thousand feet, you gain the plateau of the moor. Then Black Hill comes into view, a plain dome, rather like a flattened-out Gaussian function and truncated today by cloud-base at twelve hundred. Funny how the old feet and inches persist. I suppose the hills just sound bigger in feet than they do in metres. I remember how I used to gauge other hills by the altitude and effort of gaining Black Hill. Like Coniston's Old Man, for example which is twice the distance in, and roughly twice the altitude. But it's not a linear scale, you understand? It's more like a square-law, so for the same distance, something twice the height is four times the effort. Three times, it's nine.

Odd how that comes back to me now.

Sorry to sound so technical. I know it isn't fashionable any more. People are tired of experts, or so the politicians keep telling us. We technocrats had our chance at crafting a better world in the fifties and sixties, and whatever we were building, whatever my lot were promising back then, the kleptocrats took it, turned it pretty much into what you see today.

The track is plain enough to follow, broad, though abominably squelchy from the rains. It's an old farm track in fact, linking together what are now simply the ruins of past lives – the old farms and homesteads cleared off the moor when the land went for water-catchment in the later twenties.

The boots are holding up pretty well, good traction, nice and dry and just the right amount of stiffness. I make the first of the ruins at the foot of Black Hill in an hour, sit myself down with a view of the southern moors and pull off the hat to cool my brain. Cloud comes

down a little lower as it sweeps in from the plain and takes much of the light, shortens the time to dusk, so to speak. I check my watch, still a couple of hours to sunset, but it feels like the sky's caving in, so there are ghosts of mist curling along the track now. And then, from out the corner of my eye, bold as you like, comes Annie Monroe.

Okay, I need to explain. She's not literally there, you understand? I mean not *really*. And I know she's not. *Right*? Got that? But she's there in a sense, in a mind's eye kind of way and it's through the mind's eye I see her plainly enough: long skirt, boots, nipped jacket, long overcoat, hat – all twenties style, and yes, I do know I'm most likely borrowing all of that from other images of that period. So, fine, we've established I know she's not *literally* there, that I am, in a sense, making her up. But that said, she's still there and looking for me, sits right down beside me. It's like I asked her a question, back there in the supermarket, and she's crossed time and continents to come answer it.

Sometimes you should be careful what you ask for.

"Do you think we want things to be the same for you as they were for us?" she says.

Good point. I suppose not. If the old folks really were looking on, I suppose they'd be saddened by the way things have turned out for us.

"So quit with the guilt and buck up, Rick. Trust me, you're a long time dead."

Ah! Now that was one of my mother's truisms. Long time dead. Guilt though? I suppose I do feel a responsibility that we took what they passed on to us, and we didn't build on it. Indeed we threw it away. I mean that struggle for a more equal way of life. Yes, I've campaigned for it, but I'd not the guts, or the conviction of the real heroes of that movement, people who made a difference, went to prison for it, and sometimes died for it. So now, in spite of all that, a century of struggle, we've got kids working eighteen hour days and too scared to unionise because they know they'll get fired, and there's a long line of others hungry enough to step into their precarious existence.

Not your fault, she's saying. Now get up off your arse, and get on with living.

Okay, fine. But that Edwardian mettle only gets you so far. And it's exhausting when you don't know why any more and you're

looking back over the long course of your life and there's no clue among any of the highs and lows. There's just this endless succession of days. They're stretching back as far as I can remember, as I sit here with the ghost of my great aunt Annie. Memories – of what?

School, mostly.

"Hated that with a passion, didn't you?" she says.

Ha! True. Always felt alien amongst others. Always on the verge of collapse, of depression. Always the lust for freedom, that my days shall be my own, and if I do not wish to leave my own hearth, there is no compulsion to do so. Time to just be, Rick. Imagine that!

"And now you've made it." she says. "No one calling the shots."

Sure, now I've made it, and all the days ahead, however many they are numbered, are my own. But I find I'm lacking the one thing I wanted never to leave behind.

"The love of your family. Right?"

Nailed it, Annie. They're all gone. I've come home at last to find my house is empty.

Just ghosts.

"Then open your heart and let others in, Rick."

It's what she did after all, isn't it? Annie, I mean. Many would have curled up and died at her losses, but she found the grit to begin again. Okay, she was in her thirties, beginning the summer of her seasons while I'm entering mid-winter, and still to make the summit. My story's over, even if my life isn't. Not quite. I'm stuck, and it's winter on the hill.

Can't you give me a clue, Annie?

"Listen Rick, I don't know anything. There are no answers for you in the past. It's for you to make sense of things for me, as well as for yourself."

I've heard that one before, how the spirits of the departed have no grand wisdom to impart, other than at a very practical level. For true wisdom, for insight, you need the perspective of the Gods, and even then, mostly I get the impression the Gods just sit around watching and waiting for us to fuck up, then they have a laugh about it.

I suppose the best the ancestors can do is urge us not to make the same mistakes they did. Pity we don't seem to be listening.

We're going backwards, Annie.

"No, Rick. Two steps forward, one back, that's still progress."

Feels more like one forward and two back to me.

Chapter Fourteen

I skip the summit of Black Hill, take the lesser walked track that skirts the base of it. There's an old plantation here, mainly birch, some oaks, a fresh bubbling spring close by, another ruined farmhouse, not a stone of it taller than knee-high by now and all moss covered. It's a quiet oasis in the summer months, the trees giving shelter on three sides, and that shaggy old hill at its back. And the land's still green from the dung of generations of beasts they would have raised, all of it in sweet contrast to the sour khaki of the moor.

Someone's pitched a tent. It's small, limpet style, expertly camouflaged with a net and there's a guy sitting half in, half out of it brewing up on a camp-stove. I'm wondering if I've blundered into a military exercise, but it's just Bazzer.

"Fuck me, Mick," he says. "Fancy seeing you up here."

"Hi Baz. Looks like you're settling in for the night."

I'm apparently glad to see him, though whether this is genuine pleasure at the chance of his company, or relief he's not spending the night with Al, I do not know.

"Yea," he says. "Fond of a bit of wild-camping now and then. Join me if you like."

"Ah, no thanks. Prefer my home comforts. Good job you weren't out last night."

"Aye, that would have tested me mettle for sure. Moor's still pretty wet n'all."

"Certainly is. Just come up from the Coppice. Everything's in spate and the paths are really heavy."

He might, of course, have already spent the night with Al. Might have been doing it for years and it's really annoying to me I'm interested at all to know the truth of it, that I might even be jealous.

Really, really annoying.

I don't want to settle in with him for too long. I've still an hour to walk and only ninety minutes of light to do it in. Sure, I've got a head-torch in the sack, and my dog-stabber to test the ground for that bottomless bog that's always just one careless step ahead of you, but that bog can still be tricky with cunning traps, especially towards the latter part of the walk, and I don't want to be having to run the washing machine tonight.

Strictly speaking wild camping's not permitted up here, indeed just about everything's forbidden except walking, but Baz doesn't look overly concerned with any of the bye-laws. I park myself on a bit of ruined wall beside him, take out the water bottle, have a swig, while he stews a tea-bag in his mug. His every move suggests confidence in the field, and more than that... competence. Yes, he's a braggart and a part time drunk and he might actually be shagging Al, but I'd still know to trust him on a mountain, and that can be the difference between life and death.

I also admire his ease out here, and the sense of freedom he must get from it and I'm about to tell him that, when there comes an alarming hornet-like whine. I recognise it from last night. It's a drone, another big one, skipping along just under the cloud base a little way south of our position.

"Oh, not that thing again," he says. "It's been buzzin' around all afternoon. Drivin' me mad it is. Come up here for a bit of peace and quiet and to get away from all that stuff."

"What stuff's that then, Baz?"

"Machines, innit? Fuckin' machines. Fuckin' watchin."

"There was one snooping round the moor at the back of my house yesterday. Had a damned good look at me too."

"Same one, do you think?"

"No, that was black. This one looks paler. What do you reckon it's up to?"

It pauses in its flight, hovers about fifty yards out. Bazzer hands me a pair of field glasses. "Tell me if it's lookin' at us."

"Looking at us?"

"'Appen its them rangers or gamekeepers or summat."

"We're on a right of way, Baz. Plus the moor's open access. Right to roam and all that."

"Aye, for now it is. Right to roam, but they've bin gettin' a bit above themselves they have."

"I can't see it clearly. Gamekeepers, you say?"

"Still shoot grouse up here, mate."

"They do?"

"One of them things can cover a lot of ground – don't need as many keepers, see?"

"Ah, that would be sweet. Austerity finally strikes the land-owning classes, toff's lackies replaced by robots. Still can't make out which way it's pointing though."

"Are the nav lights green red or red green?"

"The what? oh... left to right, they're red, then green."

"Okay, so. It's lookin' away then. Keep yer eye on it. Tell us if it turns round."

"Why?"

"'Cos I'd rather it didn't see what I was doin', that's why."

Indeed, it's not immediately apparent to me what Bazzer's doing either, and it's only afterwards I realise he's pulled a hunting catapult from his sack, loaded it with a big marble, and launched it at the drone. It would have taken me all day trying to hit at that range, though it is a big target. Maybe it was just luck then, but the marble takes out one of the rotors and, with a last frantic whine, the thing spirals helplessly into the moor. With a final crunch, silence is restored.

"Hell, Baz. What did you do that for?"

"Dangerous having it buzzing around when there's walkers about. Them blades could take yer fuckin' head off."

"Well, true. Cracking shot by the way. Is that thing... legal?" The catapult, I mean.

"Oh, aye. Handy thing a catapult. Use it for Rabbits."

"Killing them?"

"Sure. Killing em. Kill a man too, stone dead at that range. Don't know why they're still legal, but they are. I suppose any bloody fool can make a catapult though. Bit of wood and an old bike inner-tube. That's how we used to do it as lads, eh?"

No, I never made a catapult as a lad.

He pulls a pair of dead rabbits from a sack. "Bagged these earlier. Want one?"

"Em... wouldn't know what to do with it, mate... but kind of you all the same."

"Fair enough. You'll have to come round mine one night and I'll show you. Soon we'll all be having to do it. Or starve."

Bagging rabbits up here is definitely *not* legal. Also, stray away from thepaths with that catapult, right to roam or not, it would probably constitute aggravated trespass. Yes, it's stretching the law into a kind of tyranny, but you've got to think the way the land-owning classes do. I hope Baz doesn't make a habit of it.

The drone's lying in a number of pieces, half submerged in bog now, its navigation lights still flashing gamely in the failing light. I have the urge to go over and put it out of its misery, but I don't

fancy sinking up to my armpits.

"They'll know where it is," I tell him.

"Who?"

"Whoever's drone that is. It's worth a fortune... thing that size. Bound to have GPS, last known position, that sort of thing."

"Suppose so."

"Should you be... I mean, hanging around then?"

"What scarper, like? Why should I? Doing no harm, am I? Who knows why it crashed, mate? Pilot error. Mechanical failure. It must happen a lot."

We're in conspiracy then, he and I. Drones are like snitches, and nobody likes a snitch. I've misjudged him. He's not what I thought. He's more complex. People usually are.

I'm thinking of the Luddites. Early nineteenth century. These were skilled artisans going around breaking up machine-looms. They're usually portrayed as backward morons struggling against the inexorable tide of technological advance. But it was bigger than that. There was a whole system arrayed against them, robbing them of bread and dignity, and the machines were an easy target, as well as being symbolic of the tyranny they faced. A bit like that drone, really, and in that light, sure, it was asking for it. But as the Luddites found out to their cost, with the enemy so overwhelmingly strong, is it really worth that kind of direct action?

I leave Bazzer to it, finish my journey home to the Drinkhouse, and all with half an hour to spare before dark. I have no need for the head-torch, and the red tail lights of a parked car conveniently pinpoint my journey's end. Here a stile gives onto the road, and there’s a guy watching me off the moor through a pair of binoculars. Same car, same hi-vis guy as last night.

"Seen a drone on your travels?"

Ah, so now he speaks? There's something tetchy about him, not surprisingly if he's lost a several grands' worth of flying nosey parker. His boss is going to be upset about that. I'm about to tell him no, seen nothing, but then maybe the drone saw me and Baz, and he knows we saw it. I smell danger, suddenly, something sulphurous, like a firework you're not sure's gone out yet and you wonder if you can approach it safely or if it's going to go off in your face.

"There was one buzzing around up by Black Hill."

He already knows this. What he doesn't know is: "See where it

went?"

"Crashed mate. Middle of a bog, just south of the summit. Yours was it?"

"South you said?"

"Yes. Saw you with a drone last night, too, round my house, just over there."

"Nah, that wont me, mate." Programmed response. Not a man of good character. Something in the eyes, something dead, evasive, something inured to guilt and responsibility for action.

"It was about half past three. I saw you."

"Mistaken, mate." He turns away then, gets back into the vehicle. I'm thinking he's about to shoot off like he did last night but instead he turns off the lights as if settling in. Then his mobile illuminates the interior and he begins yacking into it. He's in no hurry to retrieve the drone, and I don't blame him. Better waiting until morning.

I leave him to it, return to the house.

The Drinkhouse isn't especially welcoming from the outside at night, indeed it's almost invisible – the gritstone long ago having lost its honey sheen and turned black. I need to set some lights to come on automatically. It's a bleak stretch of road in winter, this, and could do with some welcome of an evening. Anyway, it’s warm inside and the roar of the dehumidifiers gives it an air of busyness, which disguises its otherwise hollowness.

The guy’s out there a good hour. I watch him off-and-on through the window. Then, on the dot of five he drives away. A corporate slave coming off shift.

Drones. Officialdom is testing drones over the moor.

That can't be good.

Chapter Fifteen

Bazzer's car's gone when I return to the Coppice around mid-morning to collect the Beast. There's no sign of Al of course, but then it's not as if I'd expected her to be sitting on the wall of her cottage waving at me. What there is though is a note tucked under my wiper blade, and it says: "Hi Rick. Is this your gas-guzzler? Call me, got some news." Then there's a land-line number and in brackets: "If not Rick then sorry." Smiley face. No name, but obviously Bazzer - which goes to show he can occasionally get my name right.

I wonder what he wants, if this "news" is something to do with the drone he blasted from the sky with his catapult. Did he have a gander at the wreckage last night? Does he know whose it is? Were the cops waiting for him when he came down from the moor this morning? Does he want me to bear him witness and say he didn't do it? I don't know why I'm jumping to that conclusion. Paranoia, I suppose. Introversion and loneliness make for fertile breeding grounds.

I've no mobile, so it'll have to wait until I get home.

In the mean time, I run the Beast into town and fill her up. Yes, with diesel. This takes a while, and I don't care. You lot have been burning this filthy stuff like there's no tomorrow, burning it for decades, so don't you dare lecture me. By the way, your tomorrow is pretty much screwed. The only difference between us is I *know* it.

It's a touch warmer this morning and there'd been something gentle in the sky as I'd come round by Black Hill. I'd wanted to warn Bazzer about the guy with the four-by asking about the drone, but he'd already broken camp, and left not a trace. I'll tell him about it when I call.

The drone was still there, unreachable in bog, all the pieces just as they were last night. One would think they'd have been out first thing to collect it. The moor's not exactly deserted – walkers using the rights of way all the time. It would only take one enterprising individual for the drone to be chopped up and sold as untraceable spares. The motors alone would be worth a fortune. Big thing like that, it's probably even registered with the CAA. It was being operated out of line of sight, which isn't lawful, so far as I understand the drone-regs, though they're changing all the time to

catch up with the tech. Though if it's government, military or cop, I suppose they have a license to do what they like.

Rights of way. Right to roam. Trespass.

Trespass isn't a criminal offence, not yet, but the law's changing to make it so, make it easier to move the travelling folk on from their encampments, easier to criminalise the activists who monitor the fox hunters, and the grouse shooters who sometimes "accidentally" take down protected birds of prey.

Is that what's going on here?

Not my problem any more.

Right now I'm wondering about a run up to the Lakes, not so much to walk but just to burn some rubber, see what the Beast feels like at full throttle up the M6. But the mood of the day turns as I'm pumping gas, becomes cold again and the rain sweeps in, hard, bringing with it hail and flurries of snow.

The kids were always excited at the sight of a bit of snow, wanting to dig the sledge out of the garage and I'd be growling at them not to scratch the car. But I'd give anything to see that look of innocent excitement on their faces again, and I kick myself for all the times I was angry when I need not have been. I kick myself too for not having had that urgent sense of a clock ticking down, that your kids are only loaned to you for a short time, and you've to make the most of what they can teach you while you've still got them. I mean, there's no guarantee they'll even like you when they grow up. Same goes for your friends, if you're lucky enough to have any.

Hell, I wouldn't have picked Bazzer for a mate in a thousand years, but sometimes your mates are like your family, you don't get a choice in them, or so I'm told. Maybe you extroverted types will understand that better than me, but to an introvert it seems bizarre. I hope that's the last of the drone business anyway because I really wouldn't like to have to deny it was Bazzer who shot it down. I mean I'd do it if I had to, while hoping he'd have the balls to own up to it anyway. But what if he was wrong about that red-green, green-red nav-light thing and the drone was actually staring us both in the face when he let fly with his catapult? What if it was feeding back a live-stream? What if it was reading faces like those cop-drones do?

Bazzer may not be on a watch list, but I am. And the machine knows where I live.

Anyway, I'm always reluctant to head back to the house, generally preferring to spend my days out and about if I can, even if it's only behind the wheel, perhaps because a world in motion lends a certain distraction to an otherwise pointless existence, but the Beast meanders me back home anyway, delivers me up around lunchtime. And at least the house is warm.

Maybe I should just go to bed for a few days, hibernate until this unsettled spell has passed over. The weather too. I regret it as soon as I walk in and that same old emptiness strikes me. I could do some writing, I suppose, but the thought of sitting down at the desk is met with considerable resistance, even as the view from the window shows the mist clearing from Black Hill and a beguiling shaft of sunlight fingering the moor. But I decide there's something ominous about it. Besides, I don't write about stuff any more. I just brood on it.

That business with the drone has really unsettled me.

I make coffee instead.

Then I decide what I need more than anything are a decent pair of binoculars like those of Bazzer's. BAK-4 prisms, judging by the brightness of that image. Eight by forties, gas purged and waterproof. A good piece of kit for the hill. Does that mean another trip to Campsmart, then? No, there's more choice online and much cheaper, and so what if it involves a white-van delivery man so hard up against his schedule he has to pee in a bottle? It's your system. Not mine. I tried to change it, remember? But you said no, we're fine with all that, fine with poor bastards working in a state of perpetual precariousness. Fine with the food-banks stopping us from going hungry. I mean what's not to like? Just get Brexit done.

Oh... Rick... Rick... but my how the loneliness flees when I start to fight and spit.

Everything is normal. Go shopping.

Sure, I know... but it gets me to the desk, and I crack open the laptop, half contemplating some firebrand piece for the blog that no one will ever read.

Welcome back Richard. Almost...

Before I can get to Ebay there's an Email from mad-Molly inviting me to the annual Autumn Tints dinner-dance, Saturday night – menu attached. Venue: the Loose Goose, Grindleton. Send £20 by Paypal, and you're in.

Grindleton? That's a bit close for comfort, Rick.

Dinner dance my arse. Music so loud you can't even hear your neighbour shout, and food you could have microwaved better yourself at home.

Anger Rick.

Okay, sorry.

And anyway don't be such a misery-guts, it's spitting distance from here. Come on, do it!

All right... all right. £20 dispatched. Happy now?

Fine, but cut the cynicism will you, I'm trying to get us through this, and like it or not we need people to do that.

Okay, Annie.

People? Number, number. Remember? Ring Bazzer. See what the hell he wants.

Okay, will do.

I drag over the old ton-weight telephone. It dings in protest at being manhandled. These things were designed to sit on a table in a draughty hallway. Portable they are not. So anyway, I dial, and dialling takes a while, I mean proper dialling, with an actual "dial" - not button tapping. It gives you time to work out what you're going to say, especially if you fluff it like I always do and misdial. Maybe more than once. Okay. It's ringing now.

Female voice. "Hello?"

Unexpected, that. Bazzer's wife? Sister? Mother?

"Sorry is that the right number for... Bazzer? Em... I mean Barry."

"Is that you Rick? It's me, Al."

"Al?" She's round at Bazzer's house? Why does that disappoint me? She's his girl, after all.

"It was me who left the note," she says. "I just remembered I didn't put my name on it. Sorry, you must have been wondering. So I *was* right. It was your car. I thought I recognised it. Not many of those gas guzzlers still around. Why would you think it was Bazzer?"

Not at Bazzer's house. That's okay then. I settle back to savour the sound of her voice, hope she's in no hurry. Al's the boss, the Captain of my soul – or something of that sort. *Let people in, Rick.* Anyway, I tell her, "He was up on the moors last night. Left his car in the lane near mine. I left mine there yesterday, walked home over the tops, then came back for it this morning."

"Bazzer still does that wild camping thing? But it was freezing.

He'll catch his death."

"Well, he seemed cosy enough. He was up around Black Hill."

"Down in the ruins of Black Hill Farm, I bet. That's his happy place."

"Really?" Mine too. I'll have to find somewhere else, now. "So... anyway, you had some news you said?"

"Nothing urgent. Wanted to see if you'd be interested in going to our annual dinner dance on Saturday night. It's short notice, I know. Probably not your thing anyway."

"Oh, that, Molly sent me the details."

"She did? Might have known. Very efficient is our Molls. So?..."

"Signed up and paid up."

"Really?"

"You sound surprised."

"I thought I might have had to promise to sleep with you again."

"Ah, well. You're right it's not my thing at all, but I shall paint on my game face, and make the most of it. And no need for you to make the ultimate sacrifice."

"Good man. Probably not worth your while anyway. But don't worry, I'll look after you. And if I don't I'm sure Lottie will."

"Lottie's going too?"

"Usually does. Ah, so you're keen now?"

"Didn't mean it like that. Just thought it might be even less Lottie's thing than mine."

"Well, sometimes you can't tell with people, can you? Anyway, you should have called for a brew this morning. It would have been nice to see you."

"Don't know where you live..."

"Number eighteen. Rose Cottage."

"Then next time I shall, and thank you."

Eighteen. Rose Cottage. Got that?

"So..." she says. "What are you up to?"

"Oh... nothing much. You?"

"Planning a route up Parlick."

"From Chipping?"

"Yes. Trying to bring it in around eight miles. Any less and people moan it's not far enough. Any more and they moan it's too far."

"Yea, that's people for you. I used to know a route about that length. Don't know if it's still walkable though. Some of it was

permissive, and things change fast in that area."

"I'm meeting a few others tonight to discuss it. Want to join us?"

"Are you sure they'll approve of that?"

"Why wouldn't they?"

"If your groupies hear you've invited this upstart noob to contribute on such serious matters as route planning, there'll be an insurrection."

"You've really got our little group's dynamics nailed, haven't you?"

"Well that was always my speciality: group dynamics, and specifically how to undermine them."

"Sound like my kind of guy. We'll be at the Pear tree on Blackburn road, about eight. You know it?"

"Yes, I know it."

"So... see you later then?"

"Sure, I'll be there."

There's a pause before she breaks the call, like there's something else she wants to say, but isn't sure how to word it. Anyway, I'd better dig out my guides and my Bowland map, jog my memory of a walk I did a quarter century ago, one frosty winter's day, a day that feels like yesterday to me, though I was only thirty five, and now I'm... well. Never mind.

To be perfectly frank group dynamics are a pain in the arse to people like me who see the pettiness of it. It's also with a sense of despair we realise it's what holds society together, whether it be at the small scale – the walking groups, the church groups, the hobby groups, or scaling up to the parish councils, the town councils, or up still further to national politics and finally, most important of all, the internal politics of the global corporation. But all are essentially the same, same personality types, same hunger for power and prestige.

I doubt I'll be welcome, because in any hierarchy, one is expected to know one's place.

Chapter Sixteen

The Pear Tree's purely a drinker's pub, which is rare these days; no food beyond peanuts and bags of crisps. They don't do fizzy water either, or Becks Blue, and since I reckon lemonade and other such concoctions contain enough sugar to stun a moose, I find myself struggling at the bar for something non-alcoholic. The landlord's gruff, make-your-mind-up expression doesn't help either. I settle for a tonic water, don't like it but there's less shame in it than asking for tap.

Absurd, isn't it?

When we were kids we'd just order a half pint and be done with it, driving or not, but the drink-drive campaigns knocked even that modest tipple out of us – or at least out of me – though presumably not out of everyone, given the number of cars on the car-park still. There are always going to be die-hards, I suppose, and they're always the most dangerous in any society, both to the incumbent and the insurgent.

So anyway, here I am, looking for a group of woolly-hats, including, most likely, the venerable Chazzer and his walkie talkie, *over*, plus several silver-haired ladies, and Al. I anticipate their expressions when I show up, frosty to a man – and woman – except Al. Al always seems pleased to see me, and it could be the secret of her allure for me is no more complicated than that, that she alone, among so many in my life, is always pleased to see me.

It's busy tonight, folk night, a couple of beardy guys in check shirts, moleskins and cloth caps are singing stupid ee-by-gum songs. Folk music – English folk – used to be about galvanising people around an emotional idea. They were the true influencers of several past gutsy generations. They inspired us to action, to liberation. Now everything's about dressing up.

I can feel the landlord's eyes are on me as I scan the bar for Al. Okay, I know I'm a stranger here, but surely too old to be considered potentially troublesome. I don't see her straight off, and have to muddle about a bit, finally squeeze through into a side room where I find her sitting on her own. She's wearing her hair long and loose tonight, cosy cardigan, crumpled cotton blouse, open to a good six inches of eye-watering décolletage. She has her map and a guidebook and a glass of slim-line tonic, reading-glasses on

top of her head. I can see her as a teacher now.

She looks up, smiles: "Found me then."

"Yes. This place is a bit of dive, isn't it?"

"Was it ever not?"

"Come to think of it, no. Am I early?"

"Not especially."

"Nobody else turned up yet then?"

"Didn't invite them."

"Oh?"

"Had second thoughts. We would have got nowhere, arguing over trivia. Told them I was meeting a fellah instead. So, what's that you're drinking?"

"Same as you by the looks of it."

"Pubs are no good any more when you're not boozing, are they?"

"True."

"You want to go somewhere else?"

"No, this is fine." I sit down with her. "I don't know where people go nowadays anyway, I mean just to chat."

"Good point."

So let me get this straight. She'd led me to believe I'd be joining her and a bunch of cronies, but this turns out not to be the case. If the boot were on the other foot, if it had been me inviting a woman to such a meeting, what would she be thinking now? And would she be as happy as I am about it? Would she not be bristling with all the sensible caution I seem to be lacking?

She's right though, about the arguing. We would have got nowhere with a bigger group, everyone wanting their say, even if what they were saying was nonsense. That's how we ended up with elephants when the committee appointed by God had been told to deliver a race-horse.

But Rick, Rick, set aside your gender politicking for a moment. She just conspired to be with you. Alone.

"So," she says. "You saw Bazzer on the moors? And he was okay?"

"Seemed fine. He'd bagged a couple of rabbits with his catapult."

I can tell she disapproves, wrinkles her nose. "He still carries that thing around then, does he? He needs to be careful. When they change the law, just sitting down to eat your lunch up there will count as trespass and the bastards will confiscate your cheese and pickle. Heaven knows what would happen if they caught you with a

weapon."

"Whacked a drone with it too. Big one." I have to tell her this, tell someone at least, just to get it off my chest. I'm not trying to lower him in her eyes, indeed I suspect he can't be much lower at the moment. But I'm vexed over the matter, and value her opinion.

"You're kidding."

"Brought it down. Wreckage was still there this morning."

"Why'd he do that?"

"Said it was annoying him. And, okay, it *was* annoying. Creepy too. And dangerous, flying low like that."

"But what did the owner say?"

"No idea. It was being flown beyond line of sight. Maybe even autonomous. I don't know."

"But... as I understand the law on drones, that's not legal. There are rights of way across that moor, people walking it all the time."

"I know, but... well... the rule of law isn't what it was, is it? Not when you've a government that plays fast and loose with it, and evades being held to account. And maybe it belonged to some government agency anyway. I know cops in other countries are using them for surveillance. So why not here?"

"Oh... BAZZER!" She sighs, lifts her eyes to the ceiling for a moment. "If he gets into trouble for it, promise me you won't lie for him."

"I am a bit worried about that, actually."

"If asked, don't lie, all right? A drone? A big one? I've been seeing them as well, various places when I'm out in the hills. Sometimes two or three, like they're working together. That's why I've been reading up on the law recently. It didn't make sense, seeing them apparently on the loose like that, like wild creatures, or flying robots or something."

"It's not just me then."

"No, not just you."

"Used to think they were watching me."

"Probably are. That's the impression I get too. Creepy really. All this talk of artificial intelligence and facial recognition. It makes you paranoid."

"Well, with me it's not paranoia. I'm on a security watch-list – though I admit that does in itself sound rather paranoid."

"It does a bit. A watch-list? Seriously? How come?"

Why did you tell her that Rick? Did it just slip out, or are you

trying to prove to her what a bad-ass, alpha male you are? Forget it, she already knows you're not, but she still seems to like you anyway.

"This group of climate protesters I used to hang out with... they ended up black-listed as subversives, or terrorists or something. Crazy really. The worst we ever did was wave placards and stop traffic. Now teachers have to dob their kids in to the terror-cops if they so much as mention its name."

She laughs. "You're an eco-warrior, and you drive that big gas-guzzling rig?"

"I don't do the climate stuff any more. I nearly got three months for it, but they bound me over for a year instead. That gives you pause for thought – first time in my life I ever stuck my neck out and I nearly get sent down. Anyway, no one's listening. We had one last chance at the election to set things on a different course, but we blew it. It's too late now. We're all as good as cooked. As for my big rig, it's a drop in the ocean. Doesn't matter a damn."

"Oh, don't say that, Rick."

"We'll be fine for a while longer, here in the temperate zones I mean. Wetter, windier of course. We've a couple of decades maybe. But elsewhere, it's already happening. Wildfires. Floods. You can't say you haven't noticed."

"You reckon they're really watching you?"

"Not all the time, I'm sure. But all governments keep tabs on anyone from the masses who protest the status quo. Makes sense."

"So... that would make me one of your known associates. Wow... that's really cool."

"No, Al. You definitely don't want to go down that road."

"Do you think they're listening in right now?"

"Got a mobile phone on you? Then yes. They listen to everything. All the time. Mass surveillance, or Bulk Collection, they call it. Scan it for threats. That's not paranoia. Ed Snowden taught us that."

"Shall I switch it off?"

"Makes no difference. Anyway, let's talk about this route up Parlick, shall we?"

"Oh... okay. Strictly business is it? *Borrr-ing*."

This is another deceit. If you want to get eight miles of a walk up Parlick, you include Saddle Fell and Fair Snape, make it a horseshoe route, and whichever way you cut the approaches, it's

always about eight miles. Bottom line? She wanted to see me. Alone. Anyway, we spend ten minutes wincing on our tonic waters, while fingering various routes on her map and we come up with the same obvious set of paths. I note she has short clipped nails, green varnish to match her eyes; sturdy, no-nonsense fingers. They're not good hands for stroking, more for gripping.

Not sure why you think that's relevant, Rick.

"Don't know about this section from the village though," she says. "There's been a lot of building work. New houses going up. Things might have changed around there, but other than that it looks good. We should walk it. I mean before we bring the group through. You doing anything Wednesday?"

"I'm retired, remember? The world is my oyster."

"So, is that a yes?"

"You mean like... just you and me?"

"Any reason why not? Jealous girlfriend, perhaps? You can tell her you're safe with me. I don't do boyfriends."

Doesn't do boyfriends? Then why am I here?

"Even though you've already promised to sleep with me twice?"

"I have? Twice?"

"Definitely. Twice."

"Oh, I'm such a tart, Rick. Didn't say sex though, did I?"

"Ah... well, you got me there. But then I actually prefer sleeping to sex these days, so I may yet take you up on it. Anyway, no. No one's likely to be jealous. Want me to pick you up?"

"Not in that gas guzzling thing of yours. I'll drive. You might have given up on saving the planet, but I've not. See you at nine? Well... no... see you Saturday night first."

"Saturday night?"

"You mean you've forgotten already? The Autumn Tints dinner dance."

"Oh... that. No. Looking forward to that. Absolutely."

"Yea, right."

We tog up in the pub, leave like a couple, me holding open the door for her, like I used to do for Mel. It feels good to be with a woman again, like that, the simple things, you know? Simple courtesies, even after thirty years of marriage.

It's cold out, splattering rain, not conducive to lingering goodbyes, not that we're into that territory, and there are some indications we never will be now, which is confusing for me. First I

learn she's conspired to get me on my own, then she tells me she doesn't do boyfriends, and then I find I'm going out on a walk, just her and me as... what?

Friends, Rick, just friends.

We make do with a simple "see you then", and I climb back into the Beast to ponder what's just happened.

Sure, on a personal level she's confusing, or maybe I'm too simplistic in my knowledge of women. But on another level I realise of course I've misjudged her, same way I misjudged Bazzer. And it's obvious really; you don't walk hills if you've no soul. You're environmentally aware. You recycle your cardboard, and your plastics, like the council tells you to. You're not cruel to animals, you don't kill them if you're not going to eat them and you don't tear foxes apart with a pack of hounds. That's my country, and hers. It's a pity we don't share those values with the rest of you.

Yes, all right, sorry about that, but like I told you, this story's about me. So you're getting me. Both barrels.

Right?

Shall we go on?

Chapter Seventeen

We don't get much by way of settled weather in England's north west these days, especially in winter. A couple of days of rain will fizzle out to a couple of days of cold, then a fog might settle in for a bit, followed by some days of sunshine. Snow isn't guaranteed. We can go years without any at all, then get a modest fall that lasts a day or so before melting to slush. Or the skies might clear, turn frosty and harden it all off for a bit.

It snowed Saturday night though, a good six inches over the moor and even a dusting on the plain, then we got high pressure which dropped the temperature to sub zero and froze everything, so the roads were salty as Al and I drove out to Chipping, and all the meadows and the fells were white.

Chipping's a cute little place, buried at the centre of a maze of country roads, just north of Preston. The snow here's not too bad, already cleared from the lanes, but plenty remaining on the fells and it's turned crispy, while the trails are hard with ice. I've a pair of instep crampons I last wore twenty years ago, or thereabouts, on a descent from Scafell. I met Chris Bonnington that day. He was on his way up, and we gave each other the customary nod of passing strangers. It was only later I realised who he was.

She's been quiet on the drive over, but I can't think of anything I might have said to upset her, so I let it ride. Maybe she's just not a morning person.

The sun's up as we tackle the broad ridge of Saddle Fell. It's a little misty in the village but we rise out of it soon enough to overlook a fine cotton-wool inversion, and the moors rising above that into a crispy blue sky. Al has a good pace, sure footed on intermittent stretches of rutted ice. She wears a bright bobble hat and big shades, looks fresh and happy to be out now, looks like a skier in fact with her Alpine poles, and sure, there's enough snow still around for that. My insteps are over-kill, but it's good to feel the extra traction and the bite of steel into ice. She'd watched with some bemusement as I'd strapped these rather ancient contraptions on, but again said nothing.

Now, as we pause a moment for breath, she unfolds the map, checks her GPS, reminds herself of the route, though it seems plain enough to me, and then without looking at me, and with just a hint

of accusation she says: "You enjoyed yourself on Saturday night."

I'm looking east, through my new binoculars. They came yesterday. They grant a stunningly intimate view of the rising flank of Wolf Fell under virgin snow, Fair Snape beyond, the trail looping round to Parlick in the South West. The BAK-4s add a brightness and a sparkle to it that's enchanting. It's such a long time since I was in the Bowland fells. Sure, much of them are under lock and key still, but like any hills, they free the soul, render my days of stuffing leaflets and getting shouted at for being a Commie bastard far away and long ago.

"Hmm? Saturday night? Sure, I had a great time."

It's true, I really did. But then I usually do once I get stuck in. It's just the prospect of socialising that appals me. Ha – funny thing for a socialist to say, I know. But if I can bear the turning out, I usually find the company of others at play energising, in spite of all my protests to the contrary.

"Lottie too," says Al. "Never seen her so... animated."

Definitely something of a tone there. Do you hear it?

"Well, she can dance for sure, if that's what you mean. Wasn't expecting that."

"So can you. Dance I mean. None of us were expecting *that*."

"Oh? Really? I did competitions as a kid. My parents were of that generation you know? They thought it would be good for me. Ballroom, latin. Long time ago, now. Not that anyone actually danced like that back then. All the dance halls had closed, and cool kids were into rave. It's only recently with it being on the telly more it's made a bit of a come-back. I'd forgotten, actually. Must still be there in bones though."

"And the hips."

"Yes. Latin's all in the hips. Forgot I had those too. I suffered for it the day after though. Funny really, on the night you feel like you're twenty five again. It's the morning after you realise you're not."

"I'd say you got the hang quick enough. Lottie too. Seemed to get the hang of each other as well." She's smiling, teasing, but still that tone of accusation.

"Ah... I get it. We caused a bit of a stir did we? Not conforming to stereotype."

"Oh, which is what?"

"Couple of introverted wall-flowers. We were supposed to sit in a

corner sucking on our bitter lemons avoiding all eye-contact, while everyone else had a good time, occasionally smiling at us, patronisingly of course, and saying why don't you get up and dance? *Aw go on, go on, why don't you?* Didn't expect us to dance the socks off the lot of you though, did you?"

"Something like that. Sounds like you've been there before."

"All my life, mate."

"So what's changed?"

"Retirement. No longer beholden to anyone for my livelihood, and finally being able to speak my mind, without fear of the sack. Now, if I want to sit somewhere on my own and read a book, I don't mind telling others to fuck off and leave me alone. It's a very liberating experience."

"I bet. I look forward to it."

"Bazzer was smartly turned out. Nearly didn't recognise him."

Three piece suit, dark pinstripe, decent haircut too and a shave. Looked like a stockbroker.

"Oh, he scrubs up well," she says, forces a smile, but it's clear the mention of his name has burst the conversation again. She folds the map, drops her shades pointedly, readies her poles. "Good to go? Not walking too fast for you am I?"

"No, I'm fine. Didn't dance with you though."

"I'm glad you noticed that. Danced with everyone else."

"Except Molly. And the blokes. But everyone wanted to dance with you. You being the boss, I mean. Me being the noob, I couldn't get a look in. Wasn't my place, see?"

She thinks on this for a moment. "Your continuing analysis of our group dynamics would be hilarious if it wasn't so shockingly accurate. But you might have stood a chance if you'd not been so busy with Lottie."

"I was not *busy* with Lottie. We were both simply making the best of the situation."

"The situation being what?"

"Being ignored by everyone else."

"Ah... fair enough."

We trek east across Wolf Fell. Deeper snow here but gorgeously scrunchy. We're still ascending, just over five hundred meters now, and I'm beginning to tire, but Al's got plenty of steam in her. I'm still working on my fitness, and clearly have a way to go to match her pace on a sustained trek, but she's good to walk with. Good

company. Knows when to talk, when to shut up.

There's a giant, hollowed-out cairn on Fair Snape and I'm glad when we finally drop into it for lunch. It's a cracking day – the fells crisp and snowy like this, and the world below hidden under a veil of mist as far as the eye can see. It's like it doesn't exist any more, all that bully-boy racism, poverty and neo-con tyranny down there, and if only we could stay up here, all would be well.

And sooner than part from the mountains, I think I would rather be dead.

I'm a rambler, I'm a rambler,...

But as well as a Rambler, I used to fancy myself as quite the photographer too, lugging a hefty camera over the fells. But you can never capture something like this, this freedom of the hill, and in conditions so rare and uplifting, the experience is almost spiritual. So I leave the camera behind now, even though technology has rendered it half the size and weight it used to be, and much more capable than that old film camera was. But cameras are all about learning how to look. And once you've got the hang of that, you really don't need the camera any more.

I've brewed a filter coffee in a small flask, brought soup in another, all of which smells and tastes like heaven up here, and amazing too, to have Al for company, while I breathe clean air. She settles down with a pasta salad, perfectly at home in the frost-rimed rocks, and as comfortable as if resting in an armchair. She is, however, still flicking the occasional barbed comment in my direction.

Is this what Bazzer meant when he said she could peck-head?

I try to ignore being drawn, drift back instead to Saturday night and, inevitably, I suppose to the feel of Lottie as we'd danced. She was energetic, nimble, and light as air on her feet. I'm not sure how it started. We were both left behind at the table while everyone else got up and jigged about as best they could. Most pop breaks down to jive and as I picked out the bones of the beat from the trash of the tune, and the lyrics, I wondered if I could resurrect a few of the simpler moves.

I'd looked up then, found Lottie looking at me, a little uneasy, a little sad, and all lovely in a nice swishy frock that looked made for dancing. I think we were both perhaps wondering if that was it now, the eating done, and nothing left for us quiet types to do but make our excuses and go home, leave the grown-ups to their fun.

Well to hell with that!

So I'd shrugged, smiled, indicated the dance-floor with my thumb and, blow me, she was up. Of course with modern dance you can get away without actually touching your partner, but that's not how I learned it and she was already holding my hand anyway by the time we reached the floor because that's just the way she is, so we launched straight in to it, swung straight into jive. And boy could she dance!

A thought occurs to me then. "Hey Al... you weren't..."

"What?"

"Jealous I didn't dance with you?"

Next thing a snowball explodes against my hat. "Fuck off," she says.

"Ah... then I'm sorry. I really would have liked to, but like I said..."

"I know, I know... couldn't get a look in." She looks away, prim, but stifling a grin. "I'll think about forgiving you."

"Hell, I'd no idea I was so popular with the ladies. It's never happened before. I mean why now when I'm over the hill? It seems a bit pointless."

"Well, don't fool yourself. Get to our age, it's considered a plus if a man's still got all his own teeth."

"Ah, sadly true. The world does rather take its toll. We all still feel like we're kids, until we look in the mirror."

"Speak for yourself." She's laughing now, but somewhere else, behind those eyes, she's hurting, and not because I danced all night with Lottie either. I mean, she's already told me she doesn't do boyfriends, that it's more of a mate she wants. So come on Rick get your finger out, and be a mate.

"Look, tell me to mind my own business but... is everything all right with you, Al? I mean, seriously?"

"Just a bit lonely, Rick."

"Ah..." I wasn't ready for that. Not sure what to say now, so I raise my cup. "Well... cheers to that. Me n'all. But not today, eh?"

She returns the salute with her pot of pasta, genuine smile there I think. Gutsy lady. "Right you are. Not today."

What does she mean by that, in relation to me? What do I mean in relation to her?

Thinking back to Saturday night again, I'd walked home to Piccadilly from Grindleton in the small hours. It was freezing cold,

but I'd been snug enough in overcoat and trapper hat – head torch to light the way. The first flakes of snow were beginning to come down, erratic in their flight, like moths. My granddad would have done the same walk, maybe even at the same late hour, only in summer and walking back the other way, having drunk his fill.

I was a lone speck of life amid the darkness of the moors but loneliness was a long way from me then.

"Drive carefully, Lottie."

We were at the door, making to leave and I'd not known she was there until she came up and pecked my cheek, squeezed my arm, then pressed a little handwritten note into my palm, left her scent all over me.

She didn't linger, and had already gone when I read it.

"Thank you for a lovely evening, Rick. You're really sweet, and a great dancer. I had a wonderful time, and wasn't expecting to."

She'd drawn a picture of a rose on it, and smiley face.

What a zinger! I always find the written word has more power than speech, and it turns out Lottie's actually very eloquent for someone without any spoken words at all. I'd slipped the note into my jacket pocket, felt the heat from it all the way home. Felt tall. Felt all was right with the world. Sure, when you look at her, you're looking at the wreckage of something from way, way back, something bad, but anyone who can dance like that, move like that, well... if you'll pardon my French, she can still shag for England.

I'm sure of it.

I allow myself the luxury of that little fantasy, while remaining cognisant of the fact anyone entering into an actual physical relationship with Lottie, whilst perhaps not as taboo as I'd first imagined – I mean there's definitely a warm, thinking, feeling human being under all that mysterious silence – they'd at the very least find it seriously strange. But I think what I'm beginning to see here, and perhaps it's on account of my introverted personality it has taken so long, it's not through knowledge, or politics, or power, or money we find ourselves, but simply in relation to others. Just knowing someone can change your life, in an instant.

Al looks like she's rolling another snowball, and I brace myself, but she fashions it instead into a little snowman with a smiley face, sets him up on the edge of the shelter.

She's lonely. Told me so. So am I. Told her so. Doesn't do boyfriends. Come on, work it out, Rick.

Just mates, right? What else?

She's being friendly, not seductive. Looking for a friend, like you are.

Go with it.

So then we're descending Parlick, a day of gentle joshing and memories of a world washed clean under crisp snow, and the air blown with fine crystals of ice.

"Buy me a hot chocolate," she says, "and you're forgiven."

"But I thought you'd already forgiven me."

"I said I'd think about it."

"Hot chocolate it is then. I'll even chuck in a toasted tea-cake, if it will make it any more likely."

"Ah... now you really know how to get to me. Okay, deal."

Later in the steam-heat of the cafe, as we stir our chocolates, she looks out of the window, draws a smiley face in the condensation.

"Thanks for coming today, Rick. Sorry if I've been a bit snippy."

"No problem, Al. Any time."

"Seriously?"

"You have my number, just call. You don't need an excuse."

"Okay, same goes for you."

Mates then? Strictly mates. That's what she's saying? You get that too, right? I'm not mistaking that?

Annie what do you think?

Doesn't do boyfriends. Except Bazzer, once. Maybe. I'd ask her about that – about Bazzer – but having won her round a bit, I'd rather end the day on a high. Plus she's to drive me home and I want to invite her in. I've tidied up specially, put out fresh soap in the bathroom. Mates do that. It's fine, and nothing heavy.

Yea right. And why not?

Because I'm a man, aren't I?

Chapter eighteen

She doesn't want to come in, tells me she's a little mucky, could do with a hot bath and a large whisky.

Ha! Touché.

So we're sitting in her car outside the Drinkhouse, the moors obscured by mist, snow in pockets by the roadside and the last of the light leaking west. It strikes me even more now how uninviting the house looks in the gathering dark, looks a little sinister in fact, and perhaps she's unnerved by it. She also sees through me, something in the way she looks at me when I ask her if she'd like to come in, like she knows I'm exploring the possibility of us being more than mates.

All right, I know. But it's true, I am. And why not?

I'm wanting her to hold me like she did that time on Pendle – out of relief I suppose it was back then, that she'd not lost anyone on the hill. But what I'm seeking now is relief from the cold of winter in the warm softness of a woman, this woman, that and a salve for the loneliness we have both admitted to one another.

I mean, that's all. Right? No more than that. Just to hold her. Indeed, as strange as it sounds, it would be the pinnacle of sexual achievement for me to be merely accepted into an embrace. As for anything more, quite honestly I wouldn't know where to start these days. But she doesn't know that, and in her eyes I see the flicker of something – a resistance, certainly, fear too, possibly – but not *of* me, more perhaps of hurting my feelings, should I be game to push things along any further in that direction, as is always the way of men.

"Well," I tell her. "We certainly nailed that route, didn't we."

"Sure did. Great day out. Thanks again, Rick."

"Pleasure."

"So, see you around, then."

"See you. Take care."

No. We are not to be locked in relationship, not linked from one fond rendezvous to another. I'll see her on the next outing of the Autumn Tints, but then only in relation with others, and until then I'll be toying still with the mystery of her and what it is in me that's so beguiled by it. She leaves me without a parting peck, looks like she might have considered it but leaves off at the last moment,

judging it might not be received in the same innocent light as I'd received Lottie's on Saturday.

Probably a good call.

I see her off, watch her tail-lights until the bend takes them, then I turn indoors, light up the darkness, and run a bath. What is this, Rick, this drift into the unfamiliar, into the feminine? What are we learning here, about ourselves? Because this is still our story remember, albeit told through the impressionistic portraiture of others. What's going on here?

Well, as we approach our seventh decade we have to ask – indeed we might already have asked – is our story not now over? Surely the setting for our story was the active years, the starting from scratch. It was surviving our time at Middleton High, scraping some O-levels, then the apprenticeship, the first year of which cost us more to get to work than we earned, so Mum had to sub us out of the fuck-all she was living off from the remains of Dad's pension. Even in the second year we barely broke even.

And thereafter, it was always building to something more: the degree, the Phd, meeting Mel, the house, a kid, a car, another kid, a bigger car, a bigger house. In short your story was in itself a microcosmic enactment of the myth of the western world, that of infinite growth, of an ego forever consuming in the face of the inescapable fact of finite resource, that when the earth is stripped bare, the oceans turbid with our trash and the air thick with the smoke of our burning, there can be no more growth. It all stops. And what then?

Well, therein lies both the paradox of our existence and the perceived source of our malaise – that if we cannot grow, we lose all meaning of ourselves. Suddenly un-insulated from the seeming void of an unfeeling universe we are faced with the unavoidable truth. We are nothing.

And it's stopped for you too, Rick, hasn't it? The growth, I mean. But since you've still twenty years at least ahead of you – the fates willing – what's your story to be now? Is it to be the reversal of your self into just another shrunken, toothless old man, shaking his fist at the stars? Or is this the start of the hero's journey, the one where we realise the old King is dying, and we accept the challenge of travelling out to unfamiliar realms, then we might bring back the secret of renewing the myth of our times, of finding a different way for ourselves to be, one that is not always expecting more, one that

finds happiness, and meaning in whatever it's got. Right now.

Hell, where did all that lot come from?

Annie's sitting on the edge of the bath, listening as my head sounds off. She has nothing to say tonight, just smiles and encourages me to think it out, or maybe all this stuff's coming from her, except she's already told me she cannot help in anything other than practical matters, that wisdom is the business of the living, while the dead look on in the hope of picking up some useful gossip.

Al likes you, Rick. She flutters close, then pulls back with second thoughts, thoughts of Bazzer perhaps. What's that about? And where is Bazzer in all of this?

Are they on or are they off?

And if they're off, *why* are they off?

I'm moving in the right direction, I think – not with Al – I don't mean like *that*. I mean in myself, if only because the house feels not quite so empty tonight. I make tea, feel cosy, the warmth and the soft light a bulwark against the black and the wild and the moor all around me. And I do not fear the moor. Never have. Then I retire early with the laptop, listen to the wind getting up and to the murmur of ghost-voices from downstairs in the bar.

I hope she made it back okay.

Al, that is.

Annie is at the bottom of the bed now. We are top to tail. Her hair is voluminous and loose over an ivory night-gown. She's telling me the reason for the triumph of the mendacious right, against all common sense, is a question of the story we are living, the myth of meaning in endless consumption, that until we have a different story, one of greater meaning and universal appeal, the right is unstoppable in its dismantling of liberal democracy, of its corruption into crony capitalism and authoritarianism.

Without that other story, there'll be brown-shirted thugs marching in our cities again, emboldened by the cheers of people who have no more control over their actions than an actor over their script. And no matter how cogent our arguments on the left, no matter how grave the poverty of the dispossessed, to say nothing of the parlous state of the planet, they will never vote or agitate en-mass for a story they do not believe in.

It cannot hold, she says. All over the world there are these trickster figures strutting and preening. They think they're the

incarnation of the all consuming gods of old, candidates ever-ambitious for the title of “World King”, when in fact, they are merely the spectres who presage the end-days, of the old myths, and of the old ways.

They are the last act.

I thought you did not deal in wisdom, Annie. Yet you talk with such insight at times.

No. You forget, those were the times I lived through. We'd like you to avoid our mistakes. Find a new story Rick. Better still, write one.

But is it not too late to be riding out for a fresh dawn, Annie, when you know we have already extinguished the sun?

Better be quick then, hadn't you?

Phone, Rick!

What?

The phone is ringing. Damnation! I've forgotten to unplug it, to spare me the risk of that small-hours connection with the fax machine. But it's only nine p.m. Early for the fax machine.

Ignore it. Settle back, conjure up Annie once more.

Silence.

It rings again. Annie raises her eyes, melts away. Okay, okay. I pad my way downstairs to the draughty hallway, to the home of the ancient telephone, and I pick it up. "Hello?"

"Rick?"

"Al?"

"It's late I know."

"Not that late. You okay?"

"Can I tell you something? I need to tell you something."

"Sure. Go ahead."

"I like you. Very much. You know that?"

"I'm glad to hear it. Thank you. Me too, Al. I like you... very much too. Are you sure you're okay?" She's a little drunk, possibly – not insensibly, but just enough to lack caution. Then you had better be careful, Rick.

"I have to tell you this," she says. "Will you listen?"

"Yes. I'm listening."

"I have a problem with men. I can't give them what they want. I mean it's physically not possible for me to do that. Okay?"

"Okay."

I flop back on the stairs. We are having a serious and personal exchange now, and I'm not really ready for it. I should be more fully

dressed for a start, not shivering in wrinkled pyjamas. And what does she mean, *not physically possible*?

"All my relationships end in one of two ways," she says. "Once the guy finds out about me, he loses interest. I mean right away. Or he thinks he's different and can cure me. But he can't. You understand? Either way it never works out. So I try to avoid relationships, try to avoid giving men the impression I'm open to anything more than friendship... you still there?"

"Yes."

"It doesn't mean I stop liking guys, stop wanting to be with them, or have them be with me. It just means we all have to settle for less. Do you understand me, Rick? And that's not fair on the man. I'm calling you because I can't say this to your face, and normally I wouldn't say anything at all, except I think you're a good guy and I don't want to hurt your feelings. Truth is I think I've led you on a bit, flirted with you... given you the wrong impression... Okay, so now I've said it. Now can we pretend this conversation never happened? But... you know now. Okay? You know about me. So you can avoid making that particular mistake... with me – on the off chance you might have been considering it."

"Okay."

"So... say something."

"Em..." She has a physical problem? She can't have sex? Is that what she's saying? "Was I considering it?" *Well were you Rick?* "I... I would have been delighted, Al. Of course I would. But rest assured, I'm not about to do a runner now I know that's not a path we can take. And you mustn't be afraid I'll ever try to cure you either."

"But we can't be anything more than friends, Rick. Now tell me that doesn't leave you feeling at least just a little bit disappointed. Because I know I am."

She's disappointed we can't be what? Lovers? Where did that one come from?

"All right. Let's say I'm a little disappointed. But certainly a lot less than if we'd gone on for months before you told me. Look, Al... it was... just that you held me once. Remember? That day on the hill. I felt the essence of you in that hug, and though I know it's not what you intended, I was comforted by that, and if I crave anything at all from you it's to feel comforted like that again, and to know that you mean it."

She thinks about this for a while. "Okay. I knew I shouldn't have

done that. Couldn't help it."

"I know. Too late now."

And we always want more don't we? First it's the top couple of buttons on her blouse, then more and more, ending with penetration and all that possessive deep-mining. In the latter years of our marriage Mel had grown tired of it, told me how much sex physically hurt, actually – post-menopause and all that – and maybe I was just getting older and didn't think of it so much as I had in my twenties, so didn't mind it dwindling to nothing. Yes, really, I didn't mind, being in love and without sex, and certainly not to the extent of pressing her to see a doctor, or satisfying myself with the shallowness of an affair.

Rachel? Rachel came later of course, and she was fun in that way, but otherwise hard to be with and the latter trumped the former by a mile. And you could never just lie with Rachel, feel the stillness in her. Same with Mel, even in our younger days.

So am I the guy who loses interest as soon as he knows the ultimate climax is denied him? I mean, I can understand that in a guy – even a decent guy. For one thing it's just so damned complicated, and maybe a man is better moving onto something simpler, something he can control. Something he can shag.

But then there's Annie settling on the stairs beside me, whispering in my ear: *You don't learn much by taking control, Rick. You learn by letting go of it, by falling into the abyss.*

"Rick? You still there?"

"Yes. I was just... thinking."

"Thinking what?"

Thinking that I really liked it when she hugged me. "I'm really sorry Al. I do appreciate your telling me. But it doesn't change anything."

"Doesn't it?"

"We're still mates, aren't we?"

"Yes... yes... still mates."

Her tone tells me mates isn't enough though, that she wants me to know she wants more, while her words – at least the literal meaning of them – tell me she doesn't, or rather that she can't, and mates is all we'll ever be.

"Goodnight, Rick."

"Goodnight."

Okay. There are two possibilities here. Either Al is a bloke

undergoing gender transition, or she suffers from vaginismus. I decide to go with the latter. What is that? It's when a woman seals up so tight at the thought of penetration – think penis, tampon, dildo – she couldn't even insert so much as a greased toothpick. She can still orgasm by clitoral stimulation, if you'll pardon my frankness, but the guy would have to make do with her hands, or a bit of fellatio – and that's fine, at least in so far as I can remember it – but for a bloke's orgasm, the gold standard is always going to be the penetration. At least that's how it was when I was young. And men will always go for gold. Women know this, or they think they do. Men too.

But anyway, how could I tell her I'd gladly forgo all ambition in that direction, just to spend the night, indeed every night, wrapped warm with her arms around me, and my head against her bosom? That would have sounded weird. Right? And besides, it may not even be true, about the ambition I mean. After all, do I really know myself that well?

But... poor Al! Vaginismus. Doctor Google tells me it's a symptom of anxiety, like a psychological lock, sometimes curable, sometimes not, but could you be bothered at our time of life? Poor Bazzer, too. Is that what went wrong with them? Did he give up on her, or did he think he could cure her?

Do I?

Well, do you, Rick?

Don't be ridiculous. I was never any good at that sort of thing anyway.

Chapter Nineteen

I'm in the cross shelter on Black hill, still thinking about all of this. I didn't sleep much after Al's call, so it's early. I'd set out at first light, bitter cold, mist in the hollows, sky full of snow and sorrows. I'm tucked out of the wind, brewing up on a Primus, while scanning the moor for hope with my new binoculars.

I still have a pair my dad gave me, British army 1917. They weigh a ton and the optics are poor by today's standards, incredibly murky. Indeed I imagine those guys back then, guys like my great uncle Charlie, would have been amazed by the acuity and the brightness of modern lenses. But if we really are so smart, how come we still make wars?

Yes, yes... I'm wanting to go to Al, and I'm hiding from that want. I want to walk on over the other side of Black Hill, descend all the way to the Coppice and call on her – *number eighteen, Rose Cottage* – apply a soothing balm to the rash of her words, her worry. Tell her it's okay, that she's okay...

But she'll be working.

The drone has gone now, the moor scarred by a pair of off-roader tracks that end in a slew of churn, by the bog. It looks like they got it stuck and another vehicle had to pull them out. I scan the sketchy path south over the moor, a couple of miles of undulating gorgeousness, all the way to the black, porcupine silhouette of Winter Hill with its transmitters pricking the sky. We natives are used to the transmitters, grew up with them, accept them as part of the landscape, though a stranger would probably recoil at them for spoiling what is otherwise one of the most sublime moorland vistas in England.

There's something else too. I almost don't see him, but there's a guy lying prone, sniper style, under a camo-net with a pair of bigger binoculars than mine. And he's watching me.

What the hell?

I smell a keeper.

Or someone who used to be.

Baz was wrong, you see? They don't shoot grouse on the moor, not any more, haven't for a decade. The sporting lease expired some time back, or so I read in the local rag. The county set couldn't make it pay on such a small a parcel, so they abandoned it. But I'm

wondering if they're going to try again. What complicates things here is the land, while owned by the water company for catchment, is also a designated Site of Special Scientific Interest, so the sportsmen and their lackeys will be watched. Why? Well, birds of prey have a habit of disappearing over sporting estates.

Pure coincidence of course.

The area is also designated as right to roam, so I roam over, and have a word with him.

He thinks I haven't seen him, tries to melt himself into the moor, beneath his net, thinks I'll perhaps clomp on by oblivious. I don't know why he draws me. Mischief, I suppose. Pique. But the direction also takes me towards the bronze-age barrow on the moor-top, and I've not been that way in a while. So off we go.

"All right mate?"

He has a weapon. I see the barrel of it now, wrapped in rag like a sniper's rifle. It is in fact an air-gun, though still powerful, I'm sure, and with a telescopic sight. He's seeking concealment from creatures, but it's a strange time to be hunting, a little late in the day for it. Then I look up-field from his sights and make out an array of beer cans. They are spaced out, I'm guessing, at twenty five meter intervals. He's just pretending then, playing with the gun, or sighting it perhaps. He's not hiding from creatures, but people.

I hope he removes those cans when he's finished. I shall be back to check another time, though keepers, to give them their due, are devoted countrymen, if at times a little abrasive and abusive to the rest of us. And sometimes with good cause.

He pulls away the net, tosses down his cap in protest.

"Wish you fuckers would keep to the path!"

A more explosive riposte than I was expecting. How to deal with that? Smile. The hunting, shooting, fishing fraternity sit more naturally to the right of the political spectrum. The ramblers to the left. This has always put us up against one another. It's rare the ramblers win, since land is power, except in this case we did.

For now.

"Right to roam, mate. Don't need to keep to the path."

Does he think I am ignorant of these things? Is he shouting at others less aware of their rights, discouraging them from the rejuvenation of spirit the wilds can bring? Three years of BREXIT and the rise of the ultras has sharpened our discourse, made us intolerant of one another, made us rude on the roads, made of

everyone a potential enemy for fingers to be jabbed at, proxies for every bit of hate and hurt.

What next? I wonder.

He rears up to his full height now, a big fellow, broad in the beam, scorn in his eyes. "Right to roam?" He spits. "Not for much longer it's not."

"Oh? How's that?"

"We'll be petitioning parliament to have it repealed."

"Ah... that *is* news." I don't much bother with current affairs these days. And who is this 'we', I wonder. "Well until then, eh? So... have the sporting rights been renewed up here, or what?"

"And what's that to do with you? Go on... just hop along, you old fart."

Old fart? I take a notebook from my pocket, unclip a pencil. These are the habits of a lifetime – no metrologist worth their salt is ever far from a notebook and pencil. I admit it makes me look a little officious. "Can I ask your name?"

No, this does not faze him much: "Mickey Mouse. Who the fuck are you?"

"I'm Richard Jeager, Mickey. Pleased to meet you. I live at Piccadilly, Drinkhouse."

"Don't care if you live on the fuckin' moon."

"Look, I don't understand why you're being so aggressive and foul mouthed. I'm being perfectly civil to you. Tell me, are you anything to do with these drones I've seen flying about the moor?"

"Them things? Better ask the fuckin' owner about them."

"The owner? You mean the water company?"

"Nosey bastards."

"Ah... so it's you sportsmen they're keeping an eye on? There was me getting all paranoid and thinking it was us woolly-hats."

How ironic!

I'm not going to challenge his right to use a weapon here, though it looks to be in contravention of the by-laws. He's nowhere near a right of way, but if he's working for the tenant who exercises the sporting rights, well maybe it's okay, except of course people and guns don't mix and even a stray airgun pellet can still put someone in hospital.

He was definitely spying on me though, like I'd no right to be here.

"I'll leave you to it then, Mickey. Sorry to disturb. See you

around. Happy... em... hunting."

Are things really dissolving back to the fundamental freedoms, now? How quaint. It'll be the gentlemen in their hunting pink next, riding to hounds, ladies trotting dutifully behind – illegal since 2006, but they carry on their traditions until such a time as the law is overturned. In the mean-time foxes are still accidentally torn to shreds by packs of hounds, especially in areas where grouse are bred for the gun. Are we really heading back to the eighteenth century? Am I to doff my cap at toffs, or risk a whipping for my insolence?

Strange. In such a world, only the rich can afford to consume for pleasure. The rest must toil for bread, and crumbs at that. Hell Rick, the class war has followed you into retirement. It's everywhere, man, this over-riding myth of consumption.

The story of man's last days on earth.

So how does that one go then, Rick, the story of man's last days on earth?

We're just coming up on the barrow now, a prominent saucer-burial, rising like a green oasis from the purple moor-grass and the sphagnum bog. Annie's, waiting, seated primly on a stone that's rolled down from the cairn on top. Cairns are ephemeral, reflective of yet another dichotomy – the people who would erect them, and those who take umbrage at their presence and knock them down. They are mankind epitomised as both creator and destroyer.

Personally I do not mind them, and in misty weather, in the mountains, they can be a life-saver.

Do I need to remind you I know Annie's not really there? One way of thinking about her is she's an eccentric method I have of processing my thoughts through imaginary dialogue, thoughts I might have had decades ago but forgotten, and yet which are still there somehow, dormant and waiting to be made sense of, in the context of the present.

I recall it was the Setantii tribe, who lived around here, according to the Romans, that is – or Ptolemy to be more precise – though goodness knows where he got it from. What I'm looking at now predates the Romans by a few thousand years, of course, so who knows what they called themselves back then. Were they the same as us, I wonder? I mean was it all slash and burn as it is now, or did they have more of a care for the earth? We like to think they did, but maybe it was just that the earth was more resilient against

a small population armed mostly with sticks and stones.

Still, it's some sort of King then, buried beneath all this lot...

A sleeping King. A metaphor. A myth.

What kind of King was he? And if we could wake him, would he make things any better than they are now?

Or worse?

Depends what part of ourselves we think the King represents.

"You're talking metaphorically about the Ubermensch, aren't you, Annie?"

"I don't know, am I?"

"Nietzsche's Over-man, or something of that sort. The sleeping king within us all. The perfected being, the one that rises above the meaninglessness of life. But you're right, we're all just irreconcilably stupid at heart, and meaninglessness is all we deserve."

We're on the ancient quarry tops now. They mark the westernmost edge of the moor. Here the land tumbles away over several hundred feet of grit-stone boulders, falls away to the more verdant pastures below, and which are always a delight after the barrenness of the moor, even under a gloomy sky.

There are centuries-old quernstones here. They litter the moor-grass like giant abandoned poker-chips, and below, of course, among those pastures lies the Coppice. Then, somewhere among the trees, along the line of the brook, there's Rose Cottage. I resist the urge to spy through binoculars, aware my body has pricked the skyline and I do not wish to look sinister to Al, even though I know she's most likely not at home.

I wonder what the going rate was for a quernstone, and what calamity of the market caused such an abandonment. I wonder what the masons who'd chipped away here did for bread the next day, how they felt to see their work gone to waste. I kneel and touch the ancient chisel marks, touch past lives, past labours, feel their pain.

Materialism is at the heart of how we define ourselves, who we are, yet it renders most of us as slaves, our positions in the hierarchy pitifully narrow. Like in the story, our greatest and most lasting happiness comes from those few harmonious relationships we manage to forge with others. Yet, for the most part, we are like these poor bastard masons, compelled to accept the mill-owner's shilling for bread, while knowing tomorrow may never come, that even an entire life's labours might just as soon be left to rot in the

fields, and useless.

I take the quarry path now, traverse north a little way without losing too much height. The sky is heavier, sagging so low I feel I can reach up and touch it. I circle back, pick up the track for Black Hill and home as the first flakes of snow begin to fall.

What do we do about Al, Annie?

Nothing, Rick. We don't do anything.

Chapter Twenty

Holcombe moor, above Ramsbottom, early February now, temperature a freaky fifteen degrees. I'm by the Peel Tower, on my sit-mat, wondering why I've turned out at all today. I'm in a bit of a mood to be frank, and the day, a fine clear sunny day, and the moor, earth-scented like spring this morning, does not register at all. Neither do the wide open vistas and the far, sunny horizons.

Today, I really do not care for anything.

It was a smaller group than usual that met on the Lumb Road carpark. Most arrived separately, a few buddied up into car-shares. Then we set out on a short circular of the impressive bleakness of Holcombe Moor, Bull Hill and Harcles Hill, returning just now via the tower. Some have paid their entrance fee and are heading up to the top of it, which I suppose is the main attraction of the day.

I've spoken to no one, walked with no one. It's as if the others have sensed in me something caustic and would avoid burning themselves with it. Even Lottie has kept her distance, walking with Bazzer for some of the way. I note she has a camera this morning, an oldish Lumix with a Leica lens, and she looks like she knows how to use it. Bazzer was predictably uncomfortable with her, but weathered her company politely. He's deeply conflicted, flawed, at times rash, but I judge him a good man at heart, though somewhat unsophisticated when it comes to women.

Under any other circumstances, he and Al would be a good match. But as they are, and if I'm right, they're doomed to circle each other until one of them burns out. He's a pussy kind of man. A cuddle and the scent of a woman isn't going to satisfy him for long, no matter how tender she is towards him. He's always going to want to fuck. And Al... well she can’t.

Of the two burning out then, my money's on him.

Al was up front with her usual gaggle of wannabe's, Chazzer plodding reliably at the rear, with Laura. I'd tried walking with them for a while, happy to ignore his sullenness in exchange for some of Laura's sweet pleasantries, but I suspect he thought I was vying for position as back-stop. Indeed I swear he clutched his walkie-talkie all the tighter as I approached, as if he feared I would wrestle it from him. I wonder if I'll be like that at his age, clinging to the most inconsequential of things so as to grant meaning to an

otherwise empty life.

As soon as I could politely separate myself, I made my way back up towards midfield and a space and at a pace where I could be on my own, and thus my self again. There are days like this when the group doesn't gel – or at any rate it gels around you, but without you, if you know what I mean. I suppose the truth of it is nothing has actually changed except for the way I see the world, and others, and am simply less comfortable in my own skin this morning, having suffered over the last few days something of an existential crisis, but nothing I'm conscious of. It must be something in my dreams perhaps, something whispered in the bar at night.

Or is it just Al?

I'm still pondering this business of the Ubermensch, wondering where the hell that came from, what dark pothole of my psyche it's been lurking in. It's years since I read Nietzsche, and not much at that; I know he's profound but I find him difficult and nobody I know understands him either.

The Ubermensch, the over-man; I get that it's a metaphor of our potential for a further step in evolution, not so sheep-like and accepting of futility. But it's dormant in us, and we're happy for it to remain so because the route to the Ubermensch is just too difficult a road for most of us to tread. Indeed, Nietzsche would have it we are it's antithesis, the last of mankind, caring for nothing but our own comforts and security. We, the last of men, sit in front of the telly, drink beer, munching on fatty treats, or we flick on our phones, looking for something useless to buy. It is our ultimate state, and we shall extinct ourselves in it, and the universe shall barely notice our passing.

I'd be tempted to say all of that's true, that we are indeed, all of us, the last man now, except there are so many who aren't comfortable in the least, neither in their own skins, nor materially, such that even the banal evolutionary dead-end of Nietzsche's last man is looking like something of an impossible aspiration for those of us working ourselves to death in meaningless jobs for poverty pay. The quernstones have been cancelled the world over, you see? The market has been sent crashing, and the workers sent home without money for bread. They've blamed it on the government, blamed it on the European Union, blamed it on the brown skinned men, on all those damned foreigners coming over here, taking our jobs, spreading their germs and daring to speak other tongues in

earshot of our precious English.

Why can't we just admit the problem is in ourselves? Why do we not yearn for the Ubermensch, for the old King, to awaken? But there's so little time left now. Why disturb him? Why not spend the time remaining in harmless distraction and the quest for the comfort of a woman's breast? Let us simply settle for being the last men.

Hell, I don't know.

Brief stop for a snack now, before we head back down the lane to the cars. Most break out bananas and other virtuous fruits. I have a chocolate bar and, yes, I don't care. Chocolate really hits the spot for me. It's been an early get-up for no reason so far as I'm concerned. But while I'm out this way I shall have a mooch around Ramsbottom, grab some coffee, put off my return to the Drinkhouse for as long as possible – at least while I'm in such an irritable mood.

I realise I'm sitting not far from where we gathered to listen to Benny Rothman that time. We won a limited right to roam not long afterwards, courtesy of the opening years of Blair's Labour government. Yes, we only got about ten percent of the land in England – albeit the best bits – but like the keeper said, I'm sure the toffs are looking to have that overturned now, as they will one day repeal the ban on fox-hunting. And making trespass a criminal offence is a serious move in the wrong direction, so far as the class wars go, though no one yet seems to have batted an eye.

Oh, Lord! Mad Molly spies me looking "thoughtful" - that's how Mel used to put it: *Looking 'thoughtful', Rick.* She makes an unexpected approach. Please Molls, not today. Spare me your disapproving looks.

"Not going up then?" she asks. Her tone suggests both a challenge, and an insult to my manhood.

Clearly she mistakes me for someone with sufficient ego to be wounded by it. I meet her head on. "Not good with heights, Molly... or narrow twisting stairs for that matter."

"Oh, me neither," she says. She spreads her sit-mat beside mine, spreads her lard-arse upon it. I'm confused by this, both her company and her admission of weakness.

"Do I owe you anything, Molly?"

She chuckles at that. "No," she says. "You're up to date with everything. Would you like some of my satsuma?"

"Eh? Em... well, that's very kind of you."

"It's a baggy one," she says.

"A what?"

"Baggy in its skin. I find they're often the sweetest, though one can never tell with satsumas."

"Oh. I suppose not."

She has the voice of the British Empire, of a headmistress: clear, authoritative, effortlessly rude.

Yes I know, all of this is me.

"We've met before," she says – hurls it out at me like a spear.

Oh, hell, I was right. She's a friend of Mel's mother. *Shit.*

"Em... really?"

"You were a doctor back then. Gave a lecture on laser interferometry at MUMU."

Well, it's true, you did, Rick! Manchester Metropolitan University. The John Dalton Building. But... that was thirty years ago. How does she remember *that*?

"You have me at a disadvantage, Molly. You were there?"

"I used to organise conferences. Your name sticks. Several delegates from your company never paid their fees that year. There was a terrible fuss over it."

And she wants to make an issue of this now? "Well... I..."

"Your fees were waived, because you were speaking. But for the others I remember we had to instruct solicitors."

"Ah...." *Don't apologise, Rick. Under no circumstances must you apologise for something so long ago and wasn't your fault anyway.* "Well, I'm very sorry about that, Molly." *Damn.* "Anyway, how did you know it was me? There are hundreds of Richard Jeagers. You can't possibly remember my face from thirty years ago."

"I made a hobby of collecting all the conference photos. I was flicking through them for old times sake, thinking how most of those faces will be dead now. Spotted you right away. You've not changed much, a bit more craggy and grey, but you've not puddinged out like – well – like me. So, what are you doing now, and why aren't you still a doctor? I mean, you signed up to the Autumn Tints as plain old Mister."

"I'm retired, Molly, though, so far as I know the PhD hasn't expired. I just don't use the title, never have really. It confuses people."

Lottie's returned from her jaunt up the tower and is framing it now in her viewfinder. She's cast us a sideways glance but doesn't

approach. I think of all the members of the group she finds Molly the most intimidating, as do I, and I'd really rather Molly would move on, then Lottie might join me. I'd prefer ten minutes of her quiet company any day. Indeed, I realise it might just be the balm I need.

"Librarian, you know?"

"Sorry?"

"Charlotte."

"Who? Oh, you mean Lottie?"

"Lottie, yes. Charlotte Derbyshire. Friend of my daughter's, ever since they were at primary school. Poor girl, doesn't know how to relate to me now, I mean since my daughter died. Ten years ago."

"I'm very sorry to hear that, Molly."

"Lost her position when the branches started to close. Sad thing if you ask me, a country closing its libraries. They say why keep them open when people don't read any more? But surely that's because they're not taught how enjoyable a thing reading can be."

"Ah, true. The inadequacies of the educational system. Keep em dumb and docile, eh?"

Is Molly a fellow traveller? I would never have thought that. I see her most clearly with a blue rosette door-stepping the recalcitrant socialists and hectoring them into submission. But then in days of old, many members of the British Communist party spoke with clipped accents. Just like Molls.

"Don't know how she manages now," she says. "Doesn't work, so far as I know. But she drives a nice car, always well turned out. Expensive boots. Have you noticed? Just wish she'd be as friendly with me as she seems to be with everyone else. I know she's not well, but still..."

"It may be like you say, Molly. She doesn't know how to relate to you, now. Some people are empathic about others' pain, but don't know how to deal with their own. I'm like that too. But also... you do have rather a fierce demeanour, which can be a bit... well... off putting."

"I do?"

"It has to be said. No offence intended."

She allows me a wry smile. "None taken. Gets things done though, doesn't it?"

"Indeed so. I wish I could be a bit more that way myself. What happened to Lottie then? You say you knew her... before. I mean...

I've asked around, but no one seems to know."

"Some say it was her mother. Nasty piece of work. Devouring nature. And Charlotte always such a quiet one. A bit like you, Richard. Went senile in the end, though if you ask me she was always like that. Horrible woman, impossible to be with, but Charlotte looked after her anyway, right to the bitter end. Enough to drive anyone round the bend, I'd say. Or perhaps she just decided one day that, since no one ever listens to a word she says, she'd stop saying anything."

"You think?"

"Stranger things have been known to happen. Quite a dancer though, as it turns out."

"People still talking about that, are they?"

"I'll say. You like her?"

"Like her? That's a loaded question. Instinctively yes, she's hard not to like, though it's also hard to really know someone when they never say anything."

"Have to take them at face value then, don't we. Oh, Lord. Cover your ears."

"Hmm?"

Al lets rip with her Acme Thunderer, calls to order. Five minutes to the off. This seems unnecessary, since there's no coach to catch, and perhaps I imagine it, but there's something angry in her voice as she raises it. She casts me a glance, spies me with Molly, decides not to join us and I'm glad for that as I wouldn't know what to say to her anyway. Instead she nods, gives me half a smile and an eyebrow.

Are we okay?

I return the nod. Thumbs up.

Sure, we're fine, Al.

You've bared your soul to me, revealed the most intimate of your secrets, and I have promised to neither run, nor urge a cure on you. Yet here we are. A nod and a thumbs up is the very best we can manage.

Chapter Twenty One

As we make our way down from the moor, Bazzer falls into step with me.

"All right there, Mick? Saw you with Molls earlier. What was she bending your ear about?"

"Oh hi, Baz. It was nothing really. Just a bit of chat. Wanted to share her satsuma with me, actually."

I still don't know if he gets my name wrong to provoke, or to prove a point, or if he really can't remember. I no longer correct him. At some point in my future I shall be like Lottie and withdraw my speech altogether, for all the good words have ever done me. Words just confuse people. Let me be an enigma then, and damn the lot of you.

Baz gives his chin a thoughtful stroke. "Satsuma eh? Better watch out there. No such thing as a free satsuma with that one. She'll be after summat. Quite a man-eater in her day, I'm told. Still is for that matter. You wouldn't credit it to look at her, would you? Face like a bag of spuds, and a fat arse to boot, and not much better in her prime. Mind you, nothing wrong with a massive arse on a woman. Really turns me on, that does!"

"Em... yea, right." A predictably coarse response. Change of subject: "So, Baz. Who's the keeper up on the moors near Grindleton? Big guy. Mouth like a sewer."

"Oh, him. Not been 'avin a run-in with 'im have you? He *was* the keeper, not any more though, not really. Fancies he still is. I've had a few rows with him. Right little Hitler he is."

"I think those drones are something to do with wildlife surveillance. He was cursing them as much as you do."

"Aye well, if that's what they are, he'll not like 'em much. Got owls up there, and buzzards now, and a growing population of wild deer too. They'll be lookin' to disappear 'em if they're restocking for a shoot - owls and buzzards that is. As for the deer, they'll just shoot the fuckers anyway – by accident, like. Still, I'm thinkin' a noisy drone's enough to scare the shit out everything that's wild up there. You sure that's what's they're about?"

"I don't know. It was just an impression I got from what he said."

"Nah, knows now't, him. Thick as two short planks. It's more likely cops, I reckon, or they're bein' tested for the cops. I mean,

cheaper than a chopper in't they, but still read your face and your number plate. So, anyway, what's goin' on with you and Al then?"

"Eh? Me and Al?"

Does my mock surprise give anything away? But there's nothing going on. Is there?

"Heard you two went up Parlick together. All cosy, like."

"Oh that. It's on the list for later this year. I knew a route from way back, but wasn't sure if it was still walkable. She asked me if I'd do a recce with her last week."

"Get on all right then, did you?"

What does he mean by this?

"Yea, sure. Al's great. Lots of energy, takes some keeping up with."

"Did she say ow't... about me and her... like."

Ah, now we're getting to it. He's either about to lay claim, or... something. "We don't really know each other that well to go swapping tittle-tattle, Baz. Look, sorry, mate but is there something going on between you and her? Only, I have wondered..."

"What? Nah, there's nothin'. Not really. Not now. We're just mates that's all."

"It's just... I get this vibe when you're in sight of one another. Like you've had a massive row or something."

"Ah, right. Obvious as that is it? Nah, we're fine. Mostly. Massive row, eh? Yea, that's a fair description of me and Al. One massive fuckin' row."

"Okay."

"So... you go ahead there, Mick, if you fancy your chances, and good luck to you."

There's a smile as he says this, as if he's pushing me in front of an oncoming train, and looking for revenge for his own misfortune in seeing someone else fall for the same hazard.

"Oh... I'm not looking for a relationship. It's not that long since I was married. It would feel a bit weird, and I'd just end up calling her by my wife's name by accident one time and then that would be it, wouldn't it?"

He laughs. "Aye, probably would, knowin' Al. But if that's your plan – celibacy, I mean – I don't fancy your chances. You've the look of a guy who can still weather a bit of time at the mast, don't mind my sayin'? And there's fourteen women in the Autumn Tints, and not one of 'em married. Have you noticed? All of 'em either

widowed, or divorced or barkin' fuckin' mad or summat, and it's only a matter of time before one of em gets their claws into you. And women of their age – like none of em much under sixty – well they're not looking for a shag, mate, are they? though they might offer you one to just lure you in, like. No what they're lookin' for is a husband. They want someone to take out the bins, and change the light-bulbs, someone to boss around, keep 'em tidy... peck their head, you know? A man's more like a project to a woman of that age, show him how superior she is. A man on his own gets lonely, sure, and that's the curse of it, but he pays a price if he decides to do something about it."

A bleak view, though not without merit.

"Sooner pass on that then, Baz."

"Me an all, mate."

"But I'm not the only single guy here. I mean... there's you."

"Yea, but I'm not much of a catch, Mick, am I?"

"Why not? You look like a guy who could still weather a bit of time at the mast as well."

"Well, trouble is I tell it like it is, don't I? That's me problem... well that an' I drink too much."

I wasn't expecting him to admit that. I look up then to see Lottie, framing us in her viewfinder. She takes the shot, smiles, thumbs up, trots on. I wouldn't mind a look at that picture sometime, check out my expression, and his.

"Bet she's a right little goer, that one. Pity her's a screw loose."

"Oh... I find her pleasant enough, in a quiet sort of way. You were walking with her earlier."

"Yea, but you know what she's like. Hitch up with anyone. Like a butterfly she is. Freaks me out to be honest. You can't just chat with her, can't say ow't she can't respond to with more than a look or a nod, you know? And then what are you supposed to make of that? I'm not a fuckin' mind reader, am I?"

"Yes but... what if..."

"What?"

"What if she's perfectly fine under all that silence, maybe even more than fine... and it's just us who's got the problem? What if, when you're with her, you don't actually need to say anything at all?"

"Nah, she's definitely leaking somewhere. Anyone who's fine, and don't speak, in't fine, is they?"

"I suppose you're right."

Now, that's interesting, what you said just then, Rick. Play that back, will you: *What if she's perfectly fine under all that silence, maybe even more than fine,... and it's just us who's got the problem.*

You wouldn't be thinking Lottie's the Ubermensch awakened would you? Because if you are, you're most likely projecting, and anyway wasn't Nietzsche of the opinion it was the woman's place to give birth to the Ubermensch, not actually – you know – *be* it. Brilliant though he was, though possibly verging on the insane, he was also a guy of his time who felt that women should know their place – a bit like Baz. And no, Baz is not the Ubermench either. I don't know what Baz is, exactly, other than maybe not the ignorant bastard I'd first thought.

Anyway, the day clouds over suddenly as we descend by the golden dome of the Muslim College, and before we've reached the cars, it begins to rain.

Then there's a minor drama when Laura can't start her car. Baz is first to the rescue, but the problem defeats him, and the AA man is called. Most of the group melt away, except for Al who, being the walk leader, feels honour-bound not to leave a man (or a woman) behind. Baz and I hang around as well – Baz to carry on tinkering with the car to see if he can get it going, me so Laura can remain warm in my car, while she waits, but it turns out Laura was giving a lift to Lottie, them both living out the same way, so both are invited to take shelter in the Beast. Lottie takes the front seat, Al and Laura the rear. Al and Laura settle in to chat. Lottie looks out, watches the traffic passing, something enigmatic about her lips. She catches me looking, gives me a big-eyed sideways glance and a little twinkle.

Spooked by that, I decide to keep Baz company, in spite of the rain, because the company in the Beast now unnerves me.

He reckons it's the coil pack, which sounds about right to me and when the AA man arrives he comes to the same conclusion, suggests he recovers it to a garage of Laura's choice. Laura tells him to take it to her local place, old Frankie Bartle over at Marsden. Frankie always looks after her cars she says with a fond glow. But I remember him as the shyster who sold me the Beast, which subsequently cost me a grand at its first service because the brakes were shot.

Laura travels with the AA man. Baz and Al each go their separate ways, but Al comes up to me first and I'm thinking she's

about to say something meaningful, I mean in the context of our non-relationship, but she asks me instead if I'll run Lottie home.

I'd forgotten about Lottie, still sitting pretty in the passenger seat.

"Em... okay."

"But be careful," she says.

"What does that mean?"

"Just... I don't know. Be careful..."

"Al?"

"Got to go. Call me, Rick. Call me any time. You don't need a reason. You know that."

So...

"Em, hi, Lottie."

She smiles, shrugs.

"Looks like you're with me then."

Nods, twinkles.

"Are you rushing back? Only I was going to see if I could find a coffee or something in Ramsbottom. Would you... like to join me?"

Emphatic nod, smile.

Is that being careful, I wonder? But it's just a coffee for heaven's sakes, and I was going to do it anyway. Safer to have just given up on the day and driven Lottie home, I suppose, but I want my coffee, and see no harm in having her around. After all, you hardly ever know she's there, do you?

Chapter Twenty Two

I move the Beast a little closer to the centre of things, find a pay and display, squeeze it into a bay. I'm not familiar with Ramsbottom any more, and everything looks to have changed. There are new-build houses where I was sure there were once open spaces, and traffic lights and roaring roads where I remember much quieter lanes. I wonder if things were ever like that, really, though, or if this is the way it's always been, and I just saw the past differently through much younger eyes.

I pick a direction at random, gesture to Lottie, but she slips her hand through my arm, tugs me gently the other way. Her touch is electrifying. But then I am not used to being touched.

"You know Ramsbottom?"

She nods, settles her arm more snugly, shoulder to shoulder now, matches pace and time, deft as a dancer. Of course, that's it with dancing; there are so many moves you can do, directions you can go: spin-turns, chassis, those snazzy little fleckerls... this way, that way, and all communicated by a barely perceptible touch. It's much faster, and more accurate than words, so you and your partner move as one, become one. Maybe I'm being a little fanciful here, but that's surely the only way to be truly connected with someone. Everything else is a kind of blindness.

Lottie is closeness and scent and softness of step. I let her lead, responding to the gentlest of pressures from her arm. It feels strange of course, yet familiar and perhaps all the more strange for its familiarity. Yes, that's it, it's not fanciful at all. Indeed it's a moment of rare revelation: every move with Lottie is like dance. It's wordless, as dances are, but full of expressive grace.

Ramsbottom is typical of the towns and villages in the east of the county, gritstone mill-terraces, somewhat dour in the overcast, downright filthy in the rain, and requiring unambiguous sunshine to reveal the truer glow within. Modernity has overlaid a jarring individuality too. The mills have gone, of course, given way to sporadic and eclectic enterprise, which means white vans everywhere. Biscuit-tin-beautiful it is not, but it's still trying.

She steers me to a tearoom, scented with bread and cakes and coffee, and we sit. She chooses a small table, a table for two, in a tight little corner. To be with Lottie of course is to *be* with her.

She orders coffee and soup from the waitress by pointing at the menu. She has long hands, double jointed, long fingers. They are stroking hands, sensual hands, dancer's hands. I ask for the same. Lottie slips the waitress her debit card. I'm about to protest this but she shushes me with a look and a little shake of the head.

Lottie's treat.

It seems we know each other well enough now for her to be more assertive. In this dance, she shall lead, and I must let her. That's fine. It's not dangerous. I am simply enjoying the day, and the company. What is there to be careful of?

I sit, resisting the urge to talk, to fill the void, and force myself by successive breaths to relax into the quiet, to stare out of the window at nothing, to be content with thinking she will do the same, and be happy. She folds her hands on the table, and I can feel her looking at me, something pointed in it. Has she misinterpreted my invitation? Is she now opening herself to something I had not intended, or want? Surely, she understands that I understand it's not that kind of dance we are dancing here. Am I guilty of misdirection, or is she not as deft on her toes as I had imagined?

She takes a notebook from her bag, writes something, slides it over for me to read. Perfect copperplate, such purpose in it, the words carefully and deliberately chosen: "You've looked sad all day, Rick. Want to tell me?"

"Eh? Oh, no, I'm fine, Lottie. Thank you."

She's not convinced, conveys this with a narrowing of her eyes, bends her head and writes some more: "Just because I don't speak, doesn't mean I cannot listen."

"Ha! Oh... well, you know. It's nothing."

More writing, then tap-tapping emphatically at the page with the blunt end of her pencil: "So tell me."

Okay, Rick. Let her have it. Let her have you. Both barrels:

"I wish I could put it into words for you, Lottie. I'm looking back on my life and finding that none of it did me much good, not inside of me anyway. And then I'm looking forward to the next twenty years, this being the downhill end of my life, and it's not like I don't know what the problem is – I mean this existential void – it's just that I seem incapable of doing anything about it. It's like... you know? You're floundering in deep water, and someone tosses you a rubber life-ring, but there's no air in it, and you've no breath left to blow it up. And really I shouldn't need a life-ring. I should just be

able to relax and swim."

I'm speaking to her like she's deaf, or even in some way insensible, inanimate, and there's no danger of her understanding, which is a mistake of course. Everyone underestimates Lottie because she doesn't speak, not realising it's perhaps the source of her strength.

She smiles, twinkles, writes: "Why can't you swim?"

"Ah, well... can't open myself up to people, Lottie. Can't reveal myself, can't let them in. Not in my nature. My instinct is to shut them out."

I don't want to say any more. I'm spoiling the moment. Such heaviness, such intensity is a sure way to lose a woman, and though I don't *want* Lottie, at least, apparently, not in the way a man usually wants a woman, I don't want to lose her either. I mean, it's pleasant being with her, soothing, just settling into the silence she casts.

She purses her lips now, gives a grim little nod as if she understands my dilemma, and perhaps she does. But whether she does or she doesn't she presses my hand, expresses a sympathy, and an empathy in the instant of that touch.

Coffee arrives. She pours.

Then another note, longer this time, her head bent for a while, pausing now and then for thought, and finally, tap-tap with the pencil: "*People are liars, Rick. They can't help it. Nothing is true to them. Especially now. We are all post-truth. Post-fact. So how can we let them in? really 'in', you understand? We must make our own rules, our own vows, and have the confidence to keep them, to live by them – even if they might seem absurd to others. That's where we find ourselves: in ourselves. If needs must then make company with others like us, but dance with them. Don't waste time, and life just talking and lying. Lying all the time.*"

She tears the page carefully, folds it, slides it over for me to keep, and I pocket it. I shall be reading this through again, many times. Then she puts her notebook away, glances sideways out of the window. We're done talking. Now we just settle back into silence.

She sips her coffee.

It's true. We're all liars. I'm lying to you now in countless ways, though I might think I mean what I say. You can never know a person by their words, only by their thoughts, and only a dancer

knows what others are thinking, then only in the moment of the dance, and only when in intimate contact, like the way a person knows the mood of the wind when their arms are wrapped around a tree, and they feel their body swaying with it. Is that why she's in your space all the time? She's reading your mind, she's feeling out the very shape of your soul by the sway of it?

That would make her really dangerous to be with. Al's right, perhaps not knowing in what way she is right, but that one must be careful with Lottie, and not for Lottie's protection, but one's own, for you could never be safe from your own lies. You would have to tell the truth *all* the time. I know what Al meant was *don't venture into relationship with her – perhaps especially not a sexual relationship*. Like that's anything to do with her. But dancing with someone is more than that. Infinitely more. At least if memory serves me right.

Oh, I never made it big with the dancing. I went along to lessons like my parents wanted, and mainly because there were girls at the class, and you got to touch them. I fancied some of them, but mostly they were only interested in showing off their dresses, come examination day, and they'd scold me if I fell over my own feet and so let down their showing off. I never really danced socially. In fact, the high point for me was dancing with the teacher's wife, like when all the girls had brought their own partners, maybe to avoid dancing with me. I'd be in my early twenties then, and she in her fifties, a competition dancer from the golden era. She moved with a silken grace that took my breath away. What was her name now?... I forget. But ah, the feel of her. You don't forget that in a hurry. She would have been around the same age as Lottie is now, and seeming quite old to me back then, but now... now...

All things are relative.

A heavier rain sweeps in from the tops and raises a sudden steam from the pavements, brings me back to the present. Skies thicken to grey, their bottoms almost scraping the chimney pots, and the moors are taken by a pale, shifting clag. I'm about to say it's looking a bit grim, realise it doesn't need saying, so I don't...

Soup arrives. We settle to it.

"Thank you," I tell her.

She smiles, shrugs.

And when it's done, we sit a while in a perfect, easy silence, and then, by some unspecified and unknown signal, we both know it's time to be moving on. She indicates with a sideways slide of her

eyes and a tilt of the head and I concur with a nod. On the street, she takes my arm again, links close, pulls a dainty brolly from her bag and shelters the both of us with it as we head back to the Beast.

Of a sudden, now, there seems something quite extraordinary about her.

Of course I don't know where she lives and, as ludicrous at it sounds, I don't want to spoil the silence by asking her. So I wake the sat-nav, gesture to it and she taps in her postcode. I make sure the voice is off. I'll drive by the arrows. Unlike with Al, a relationship with Lottie isn't going to include much by way of spoken dialogue.

Thus we cross the Western Pennines in a storm, headlights, driving lights, and wipers on. I drive slowly as befits the weather, am tailed aggressively of course by several luxury saloons in predictable and tiresome succession, all with headlights seemingly on full-beam. I twist the rear-view to reflect their stupidity back in their faces, but am otherwise successful in ignoring them.

The weather is a little more settled as we come down the other side of the moors, towards Middleton, the sat-nav pointing me further out, towards the plain, towards the coast, the lanes splintering here into ever smaller ones, into tall hedgerows, and meadows, while the land becomes flatness and sky.

Then the sat-nav indicates we've reached journey's end half way along a lane I only vaguely know. With the faintest movement of her hand, Lottie gestures me on a bit, and so I follow to a stout pair of gates. She takes a thing from her bag, presses a button on it and the gates slide open onto a long, gravel-scrunchy driveway, flanked by a fine hedge of copper-beech. She gestures me in, takes out her talking-book as I drive, writes something down.

It's an attractive house, nineteen twenties vintage, a double-fronted, red-brick villa with later extensions to the sides and rear. There are mature gardens, evergreens and lawns, and... is that a pool-house? I wonder of course how she manages all of this without a voice to command others. She must have someone to help her. There have been gardeners at work, cleaners, tradesmen. Hell, a place like this is a body's work just to keep it weather-tight and running straight, let alone looking as trim as this, and in the depths of winter, too!

I don't know what I was expecting of her home, something odd certainly, I mean knowing Lottie, but certainly not this. It's not a huge place, but still, it has – what's the word – as sense of opulence,

I suppose, and beautiful grounds. It's worth millions. I don't get it.

It's certainly an honourable profession, a Librarian I mean, but like all public servants working at the coal face, the pay is notoriously poor and, from what Molly told me, I gather Lottie's been redundant for some time. The only other answer is she was, or is married to a drug dealer or some other form of gangster.

Is that what Al meant by being careful?

I pull up outside the door. She shows me the notebook, the talking-book, something soft and shy about her now: *Would you like to come in, Rick?*

"Ah... well, that's kind of you Lottie, but my trousers are a little mucky. And I could do with a hot bath."

I'm also tired, and sweaty, and I find the property, and by proxy now, Lottie herself, intimidating in ways I don't understand.

Is she... some kind of toff?

More scribbling. Another note: *I have a washing machine. And a bath.*

There's another look about her now, clear eyed and serious. *You want to see how deep this goes, Rick? How deep I go?*

I recall Molly's challenge to me that morning, about not climbing the tower. I didn't climb it, and didn't mind admitting my fear, because I'm not troubled by a petulant ego, am old enough not to care what people think any more, mainly because I'm reliant upon them for nothing, least of all for a living. This is a different kind of challenge of course, but still induces a similar sense of vertigo. And that I'm even contemplating crossing the threshold with Lottie suggests I'm already in need of something I think she can give me. I don't know what that is, exactly, except I fear its loss if I drive away. The nearest I can get to it is... calmness.

She reads my hesitation as a glass half full assessment of the situation, hooks me deftly then with her eye, lands me like an over-curious fish that lingered a moment too long. And where's the harm? It's not like either of us are kids, is it? It's not like someone's going to end up getting pregnant.

But there are other things that can irreversibly change a life. And I suppose that's what we're all searching for at bottom, the one thing that will either change your life, or explain it.

Chapter Twenty Three

The earth is rusty-red and dusty here, the sky a deep sepia tint, fading to the colour of straw where the sun has just gone behind the hills. There's a pleasant warmth to the air, and a dryness. It's coming out of the earth, quaking up from the rocks themselves as they give back to the heavens what the sun has poured into them all day. I'm sitting on the porch of a pioneer's cabin, out in the wilderness of Western Australia. We're somewhere on the frontier, as it was I suppose towards the later nineteen twenties, and as near as I've imagined it at various points in my life.

News from home isn't good. The vacuum of peace following the war to end all wars has been filled with the decimation of traditional industries, and civil unrest on account of poverty. In America there's been a market crash and stock brokers are leaping from the windows on Wall Street. All this is nothing of course compared with the previous decade, forty million dead in the first war, then fifty million in four waves of the H1N1 contagion – the so-called Spanish Flu.

I'm with Annie, the pair of us gazing at the afterglow of the sun. She came out on the SS Balranald in '23, left her child with family in Ulverston, and she misses the kid deeply. I mean she must have, mustn't she? Did the kid eventually travel out to be with her, when he was older? A boy. Ewan. I can find no record of him in Oz, but he would have been old enough by then to have got swept up in that second war.

Great Uncle Charlie's been dead since '18 of course, but she still thinks of him, though by now she's married anew, and carrying another man's child – always something pragmatic, adventurous and uniquely admirable about Annie. Such a terrible tsunami, the first two decades of the twentieth century, but she rode them out, rode them clean across the globe, planted her shovel in the dirt and said: this is where I'll start again.

The world has seen such unimaginable upheaval, and no more so than in the first half of the twentieth century. Europe at least saw relative peace and prosperity after that, a period that coloured the aspirations of all, like me, who were born into the second half. We never knew a world like Annie knew, and it's hoodwinked us into thinking it's impossible things could ever be like that again. I

suppose ours being also the nuclear age, it gave us a certain bleakly arrogant confidence, that should such upheaval ever be visited upon our generation it would result in the earth being turned into a cinder, and would anybody really be so stupid?

Don't answer that.

"I guess I'm dreaming all of this then, Annie?"

She nods, smiles tenderly. Her hair is dusty from a day tending the stock, which she describes as a sea of sheep, and her face, her cheeks, are different to my imagining, with their more natural pale Lancashire pallor burned red.

"I suppose so, Richard. But it's lovely to see you, anyway."

I'm not in the habit of dreaming of Annie, not like this, not so... vividly. I know I tend to conjure her up in waking reveries, but that's different. This is coming from the deeps, and there's an easy pleasure in it, something comforting. I'm not saying this is anything more than it is, that I'm just dreaming, right? The thing is, I don't know where I'm dreaming from, from what part of my life I have slept. Indeed, I can barely remember any of my life, yet still feel perfectly myself here, and complete, for all the lack of memory.

"I think I know what you're trying to say," I tell her. "But you were barely thirty when you came out here. I'm at the wrong end of my life, and anyway there's nowhere like this now for ruined Brits to go to any more. All our bridges are burned. Our horizons have narrowed. Soon there won't even be a Britain any more, just an England. And fifty odd million of us cooped up and screaming abuse at one another via our phones."

"Well, you don't need to come all the way out here and tend sheep, Richard. All you need's a bit of money to be comfortable. And you've got that. Do you think I would have made that decision if I'd your money?"

"But do I want to be comfortable? Is that all I'm good for now? Am I just another last man standing?"

"Well, no fun in prison either," she says. "Or with your head bust open by a policeman's billy-bat. Those are the times I remember too, and the times you're running up against all over again, or so it seems to me, and God help you. But you're in a position to ride all that out. See it through to better times."

"True. And I'm too old for all of that protesting anyway. I'm scared by it. And I don't like being on a watch-list, same as any bloody murdering terrorist psychopath when all I wanted to do was

change our suicidal dependence on fossil fuels, and redistribute a bit of wealth from the top so there aren't people begging on the streets of our market towns any more. Seems that was too much to ask though, or rather not enough of us wanted the same."

"So what is it you want now, Rick?"

"Just company, Annie. I want to be with someone who wants to be with me. Someone I can take care of. Protect."

"Why protect?"

"I don't know. Because in a way I was trying to protect others by my politics and my protests. By sticking it to the man on behalf of others."

"And because you enjoyed it?"

"Yes, I'll admit that. I did enjoy it. Until the big bastard man crushed me flat."

"So you led them to vote, and they voted for you to shove it up your arse. Fair enough. So maybe now you're looking for something smaller and more docile to protect, like a hamster maybe? But have you thought what you need more than all of that, Richard, is someone who wants to protect you? Also, maybe you're looking at things the wrong way. Sure, events being what they are, it's easy to say the world's done for, but what about you? Are you done for? Inside I mean? Or after all the ups and downs of your life, could it be, do you think, that in spite of the way your thoughts are most naturally inclined these days, you're actually on the cusp of a greatness of spirit like you've never known before?"

"Cusp of greatness? Doesn't feel like that to me. Were you ever, do you think, on the cusp? Coming out here I mean?"

"Sure, why not? Can you imagine Blackburn in the nineteen twenties?"

"Seen pictures. Knew it best myself in the seventies. Time's not improved it much."

"Coming out here, Rick. I found myself, I think, or as near as a body could. You can do it too. You've got to see beyond events, though. Events... they're just noise, like the clatter of a loom, it's all incidental to the weave of the cloth. You understand that, don't you?"

"The cloth?"

"You, Richard. The warp and the weave of you."

"You're way ahead of me, Annie. You're wasting your time looking over my shoulder. Me and my times, we've nothing to teach

you."

"Well, like I'm sure I've said before, you don't get to my age and not pick up a thing or two. Nearly made it to ninety, I did. Outlived two husbands. Plus the times were, shall we say 'interesting'. You tend to grow up fast when there's a lot going on."

"But you said the times, the details, they're just noise."

"Sure they are, which means in quiet times you can learn as much from the small things if you know how to look and how to read them. Me, I learned some lessons those six weeks crossing the world from Blackburn to Fremantle, to say nothing of the next fifty out here. You'll maybe learn as much just crossing over the threshold of a woman's house. That can take you to a different continent, too, you know? All depends on what you do with it."

Chapter Twenty Four

There's a delicate scent, something fresh and flowery. It filters through into awareness before the vision clears, and then the head resumes focus as the dreaming fades, and I finally catch up with myself.

Where am I?

Ah, okay...

I'm reclining in the corner of a comfy sofa, in a bright room that seems made of glass. The day is still grey but I'm looking out of a wall of window at the garden which, from here, manages beauty of colour and form, and composition. It's in the red of the dogwoods against the evergreens, it's in the spray of white from the snowdrops beneath bare trees and it's in the angularity of lawns and landscaping. And it’s in the expansiveness.

There is no winter here. Only warmth and light.

By contrast, I generally cannot bear to look upon the sodden morass of my own garden until spring, and only reluctantly, as I mow. Then the lawn sulks, yellow and balding, until the summer dries it all to tinder.

I'm wearing nothing but another man's dressing gown, feel exposed and light in my skin, but in a way I'm perfectly, and strangely open to it. My clothes, every last stitch of them, are tumbling in the washing machine. Lottie put them in on top of hers while I bathed – a deep bath with salts and other essences she'd prepared for me after she had showered. There was a luxuriousness to it, sinking into that aromatic water, amid the clean modernity of her bathroom. How long since I had bathed in water drawn by another hand?

You were probably a child, Rick.

It might seem to you as obvious an opening to sex as one could imagine. Crossing her threshold I had imagined, and with some trepidation, the open door of that washing machine and us unbuttoning our clothes, feeding them in one item at a time. As erotic fantasies go, it's as potent as any other. Except it wasn't like that at all, at least not in the feel of it. And Lottie's demeanour as she led me indoors, suggested it wouldn't be like that at all. Exactly how it will be, between us, remains, still, unknown.

So, she showered and ran a bath for me, and while I bathed, she

gathered up my clothes, smalls and socks and all, from where I'd laid them, outside the bathroom door, and she'd put them in the machine. She was, for a time then, like an imaginary woman, just sounds about the house, and as substantial as my dreams of Annie, but unlike Annie, there comes with Lottie a powerful charge seemingly independent of her presence, and which of course may be entirely imagined.

I am resolved to venture nothing here, to savour only the experience of the moment, to submit myself to it, and yes, I suppose submit also to Lottie, to gift her anything she wants, so long as that means leaving here, as soon as my clothes are spun dry, with our dignity and friendship intact.

Is that not being careful?

It was only afterwards, after bathing, after putting on this rather luxurious, unknown man's dressing gown, and when I came to look at the machine, I felt an eerie, erotic stirring at the sight of my shirt twisting sensuously with hers, her bra with my socks, her pants with my trousers like the whole swirl of it was dancing – arms, legs, bodies, breasts, loins, indeed every intimate part of us in the act of touching every other part and all at the same time, amid the suds and the swish and the humming vibration of the machine.

That's where she found me, lost in the tumble of it. She had changed into snug denim and a soft sweater, smiled, gave something of herself away with a faint blush as she met my gaze, then gestured to the light-filled room and invited me to sit. So I sat, and she mimed drinking from a teacup and saucer, little finger raised, and I nodded.

"Tea will be lovely," thank you.

When she went out to make it, like any man would in such a highly charged situation, I settled back and, in spite of myself, drifted off to sleep.

Thus it was I sat a while with Annie on the porch of her cabin in the wilds of Western Australia, talking both of the tumultuous changes the world has seen, but also the irrelevance of events to what I suppose I must term *the call of the spirit* – though not in any religious sense, you understand?

I'm sure I was only gone for a moment, brought racing back from the dust and the pleasant warmth of that evening in the late '20s, by the tinkle of teacups on a tray. I have brought something of the dream back with me too, an essence, a feeling... *we should*

savour the adventure gifted to us in even the smallest of details. But that requires a particular way of looking, and surely I have been too filled with righteous anger of late for that.

"Sorry Lottie, I nodded off."

She shrugs, raises her brows, purses her lips into a slightly saucy smile. Do I mistake that expression, or is she managing, even without words, to joke with me?

"I'm fine though. Don't need a bed or anything."

She nods emphatically, grants a wide, mirthful smile. Correct answer, Rick. Her bed is not on offer. Yet here you are like an ingénue, relieved of your clothes, and just one deft sweep of the seducer's hand away from the disgrace of your nudity.

Is that being careful?

"Em, so... you have such a lovely house, Lottie."

Her eyes slide away. No, this does not engage her. Remember not to talk, Rick. Talk only when practical necessity dictates, and for the rest, just dance with her.

Silence suffices while we drink tea, and then, spontaneously: "You have a pool?"

She nods, unfolds herself from her chair takes my hand.

"Sorry Lottie, I wasn't being nosey, I..."

She shakes away my apologies, wants me to see the pool, leads me through a glass passage which connects to the pool-house. No, Rick, don't think about the carbon footprint here. That doesn't matter any more.

Just admire.

It's about twenty by twenty meters, pleasantly warm, clean tiles and blue water. Gorgeous. But what I'm thinking is, of all I've seen here, all this loveliness, how can she be happy, alone?

She mistakes this wistfulness for something else perhaps, looks confused, a question mark forming in the fold of her brow.

"I was only thinking... this is all so lovely, Lottie. But... is there no one with you?"

The question startles her. She shakes her head, indicates the pool.

"Yes, it's beautiful. You like to swim... obviously."

I'm not getting it. There's something else she wants to say but it's complex and she hasn't got her talking-book. Then she puts her hands together as if in prayer, mimes diving, swimming.

She wants you to swim, Rick.

"What? Now?"

Shrugs, nods. "If you like," she's saying.

No, she's saying more than that. She saying she would like it too, for you to swim. In her pool. You were talking earlier, in metaphor, about swimming, weren't you Rick? You didn't think for a second she might actually have been listening, did you? You must be more careful with what you say.

But how did that go again?

You have a problem opening yourself up, revealing your true self to others?

"Oh, well... that would be terrific. Haven't swum in ages, but honestly... I mean... I'm, well, not wearing any trunks under here, am I?"

Did I read that right? In her eyes? Was that a, *'so what'*?

What does she want? She's holding out her hands, for what? For an embrace? No, you fool, for the gown. All she wants is the gown, and for you to reveal yourself, Rick.

"Oh, I'm not much to look at Lottie. Never was really. Even less nowadays. Sight of me under here would most likely put you off your tea."

A wider smile, the closest she gets to mirth, I've noticed. She stretches her fingers for the robe, wiggles them for emphasis, and as if by magic, off it comes and into her hands. There is nothing lascivious in this, in her. She looks only into my eyes, blinks then, nods as if in recognition of something, then turns and seats herself on a wicker chair, an air of erect anticipation, the gown beside her. I am revealed, and she is all attention. So I lower myself in and swim.

I realise I have never swum naked before, and of course never under a woman's gaze. The sensations of both the moving water, and that perceived gaze are of course exquisite – the water sensual, and the imagined stroke of her gaze upon my skin is altogether more profound. However, an Olympic swimmer I am not; a slow breast-stroke and a clumsy crawl are my limit, and not much puff for more than a half dozen lazy lengths of the pool. Then I float up on my back for a bit, conscious I am more visible to her "in person", so to speak, this way, though God knows if this is what she wants – if she wants anything and which I am beginning to doubt – or even what she sees when she looks at me.

Eventually I feel a chill, and make for the side. She's already

waiting with a towel, gathers me into it as I climb out, indicates a shower in the corner of the pool-room. It's not enclosed. She wants to watch me shower as well? No, we're done now. She walks away, gives me a backwards glance that could mean anything, then leaves me to it, to shower off the chlorine, and find my own way back to her.

Twenty years ago, and even for me, it would have been a straightforward path from here, to sex. But these are not normal times, and we are neither of us normal people.

Chapter Twenty Five

"So did you sleep with her?"

"Who?"

"You know who. Lottie."

"No! Absolutely not!"

I have spread a spare sweater on a rock for us, and we are sitting on it, Al and I. We're nearing the end of another outing of the Autumn Tints, and have paused to rest in this, the cathedral-sized, cave-scented amphitheatre that is Goredale Scar. If you have never seen it, try to imagine a thundering cavern, open to the sky, a mixture of grandeur and sublime horror to which no photograph can ever do justice. The rest of the group is inching towards the high altar of the roaring falls, which are like a white mare's-tail combed out for show, and particularly beautiful today.

Al and I have fallen back a little and, as if by mutual consent, have seized the one opportunity we've had all day to talk, to catch up.

"That's an overly emphatic denial," she observes. "Did she not at least invite you in?"

It was not an overly emphatic denial. Al imagines it, or she's trying to draw me out. But I am impervious to provocation, feel strange, actually, like I'm floating, or on Prozac or something. I've been like this since leaving Lottie's house, weeks ago now. Everything looks to be in sharper focus, the colour of my world – sparse enough in winter – more saturated, the contrasts deeper. Even my dreams have a greater vividness about them, sweeping tapestries of sensual delight that have me waking in wonder.

"Yes, she invited me in."

"But you refused of course – said you were muddy and could do with a hot bath."

"I did say that, yes, but I went in anyway. We had a pot of tea, and then I drove home."

Naturally, I do not mention the washing machine, the hot bath, or the nude swim. Well... not yet, anyway.

"You can't have had much to talk about. I mean, her not speaking or anything."

"True, not much,.. but sometimes it's nice just to sit and say nothing, and not feel the need to say anything. Don't you think?"

"No. That would drive me mad. What's her house like?"

"Well... unexpected. Big. Gated."

"You're kidding, like a mansion or something?"

"Not a mansion, no. Just... nice. Private."

"And she lives alone?"

"Seems so. At least I didn't see anyone else around, and it seemed rude to press her on it. But there must be cleaners, a gardener, someone to take care of the pool. She must be loaded, Al. And I mean *seriously* loaded."

"Wait... she has a *swimming* pool?"

"Yes. A big one. Indoor. Heated."

She thinks on this for a moment. "There were rumours a while back she'd won on the Euromillions or something – always well turned out, nice car. But you never know whether to believe these things or not. And most of what we know about Lottie is rumour anyway."

"Who told you about the Euromillions?"

"Laura, but she was a bit cagey."

"Well, it would explain the house. It's not the sort of place you'd normally associate with a librarian."

"She's a Librarian?"

"She was. Before her branch was closed down in the cuts. According to Molly. I thought you knew all about her."

"Not as much as you, clearly. And you've only known her five minutes."

We have walked from the little Dales village of Malham, a short circular up the million steps by the cove, across the grey crenellated crazy paved plain of clints and grikes that make up the cove-top, then a short pull up the green to Malham Rakes, and now down to Goredale. The sky is clear, but there's a steady wind with razor-blades in it, and a hint of rain from the North. The walk was far enough and high enough for a cold day and I'm ready to head back to the chuck wagon now at Goredale Bridge for a brew and a bacon butty. Then we have only a mile or so, by Janet's Foss, through the woods and the meadows, back to Malham, and the cars.

Lottie has kept company with Laura for most of the way, the two of them only a little ahead of Chazzer and his walkie talkie. She's kept her distance from me, which is interesting, but not disappointing. I feel confident enough in our relationship, albeit a strange relationship, and one, as yet, without a name. I count the

people who have seen me nude on one hand, and she is the only one who seems to have taken any interest in it, without it being a fleeting precursor to something else.

As we strode out over the cove top, I'd found myself at one point balanced awkwardly, a deep fissure threatening to take my leg and break it, a moment of genuine alarm – for breaks at my age mend but slowly – and it was Lottie who'd appeared at my side, then reached out to steady me. There'd been a smile then and a look of intimate knowing, a sturdiness in her touch, and all sufficient to confirm our time at her place had not fizzled to nothing, that it had indeed changed things between us, cemented us in some way, though as yet the conclusion of that particular story remains unknown.

When I'd found her in the lounge, after the swim, she'd looked deeply contemplative, but not in a dark way. She had looked up at me and simply mouthed the words 'thank-you', and nodded as if in appreciation of something, though I could not imagine it was merely the sight of a late middle aged man's baggy skin as he'd splashed about child-like in her swimming pool. It was only later, driving home, it came to me. She had wanted nothing other than to give me an opportunity to be true to my word, to reveal myself, and to swim.

It's like in dreams, you know? You find yourself naked in front of people and embarrassed. It's the dream's way of telling you you're afraid to be seen as you really are, that you're conscious you're hiding a part of yourself from those you know, afraid they will judge you. In a way then the encounter had been metaphorical, dream-like, not sexual, and as is the way with myths and dreams, when their meaning is revealed, I had felt then a shift in myself that would never settle back the same way.

As we sit now, Al and I, we're overtaken by a young guy in what looks to be brand-new climbing gear, outrageously patterned in what Al later described as migraine-yellow on black spandex. He has muscled arms and muscled calves but they are of the gym-honed variety, and therefore rather more of a deformity than he perhaps appreciates. Indeed the poor fellow looks altogether too stiff for a climber, or indeed anything physically useful.

He's dressed for summer in knee-length Lycra pants, a tee-shirt and a bandanna on his head, like he's just come from free-climbing in California, and there are of course a multiplicity of tattoos. I feel

the cold creeping into my bones just looking at him. He has a similarly attired lady in tow, also deformed by gym-works and self-mutilated across her back and arms by tattoos. They're making for the falls route, this being a thirty foot scramble up the waterfall, and which leads to an upper chamber where there hides another fall, then the long path up to Malham cove, on the moor. It is rather a daunting link along one of the classic walking routes of Britain.

"Ever been up that way?" asks Al.

"When I was younger. Don't know if I'd be confident enough to tackle it now though. You?"

"Same. Though I remember it looks more intimidating than it actually is when you get to grips with it."

"True. Kept meaning to have another go at it, but I'm easily put off by risk these days."

"Same. Fancy having a go sometime? The two of us?"

"Absolutely. That would be very fine, Al."

"Maybe in the summer when the falls are dry."

"Sure."

I am already looking forward to it, though I shall no doubt shame myself in front of the Boss. She is, after all, bolder than me, to say nothing of being younger and fitter.

We can see the brilliance of the guy's teeth, even from a distance, glowing white like the lume of a watch in darkness. Al and I settle back to observe the golden couple, maybe get some hints for our future expedition up the falls route. The guy, scrambles up a few holds, then pauses, teeth a glow, while his lady takes a picture from below, framed so as to make it look like he's several thousands of feet up. Then he shuffles back down and they make their way out of the cove.

"Fucking poser," mutters Al.

I laugh, but I realise without cynicism. "Ah, yes. The Instagram generation. It's for people like that I fought a class war. And lost." I am in a way laughing also at myself.

"I'd thought people like that were on the other side to you. Your class enemy. That they won."

"No... he only thinks he's on the winning side. He'll realise, and probably too late, he was not."

She looks at me. "If you don't mind my saying, Rick, there's a weird vibe about you today."

"Oh?"

"You seem dreamy, laid back. When I first met you, there was such an anger, it was sparking out of you. If I didn't know you any better I'd say you'd been having sex for the first time, and having it for weeks."

"Ah... now, I do remember my first time. If only one could bottle that feeling, eh?" It's true, I do remember it, and Al is right, that's exactly how I've felt now for weeks.

"I wouldn't know," she says.

"Sorry. That was clumsy of me."

She lets slip a wry smile. "Well, it was never for lack of trying."

"Ever talked to a doctor about it?"

"Why should I?"

"Because it bothers you."

She's edgy now, tapping the Acme Thunderer against her knee like she's ready to call time on the sudden direction of our conversation. She sighs. "Yes, of course I have. But I find Doctors are only good at two things."

"Which are?"

"Telling you there's nothing they can do ,and you have to live with it, or you're going to die and you have to live with that as well."

"That's a bit unfair. Doctors are like anyone else. They do their best in spite of a system that's increasingly set against them."

"I suppose so. But in my personal experience it's true enough. And you don't get a monopoly on righteous indignation, you know? I get to be angry at the world too."

"Fair enough. Wait,... you're not?... ill,... are you?"

"You mean have I been told I'm going to die? No. Bless you Rick. Not yet, anyway. But my mother was. Did. Die, I mean. And there was nothing they could do but tell her that. And she had to find a way of living with it."

"And you. You had to live with that too."

"Yes, me too."

She's about to raise the whistle to her lips, but I stay her hand. "You'll have the crags on top of us, plus I think Bazzer's hung over."

She curls her lip contemptuously. "Bazzer's always hung over."

Bazzer, mate, what did you do that so infuriates this woman?

Distraction required, and fast:

"Come on, Boss, I'm gasping for a brew and bacon butty. The others will trickle back when they know we've gone."

"Since when did you become so assertive? Oh, wait, I know. Since you slept with Lottie."

"I did *not* sleep with Lottie."

"Bet you wanted to though. Especially when you found out she was loaded. How does that sit with your class war? Sleeping with the enemy."

"The rich are not actually my enemy, Al. They're more like fungus, a fact of life, grow in inconvenient and sometimes irritating places, like between one's toes. They can be as rich as they like. I only insist they pay their share of taxes like the rest of us. As for Lottie, I admit her fortune – if that's what it is – does give me pause, but not for the reasons you're thinking. And a lottery win, coming from where she came from... or anyone from the lately impoverished middle downwards, that's different. That's escape. Education and hard work doesn't cut it any more. If you're poor, you stay poor. What you need is outrageous luck, or lots of money to begin with."

"Doesn't make her any less lonely though, does it?"

"Ah... now that's true. And therein lies her vulnerability. And her danger to others."

"Her danger?"

"Because we want to befriend her. I do love her, Al. Like I love you, and Baz, and even Molls and Chaz come to that, indeed all of you, all you funny woolly hatted Autumn Tints, but she's taken a vow of silence, and rejects others. We find it hurtful, because we don't understand why she did it."

"And you do, I suppose."

"No, but I'm trying. At least it's better – and by that I mean more self-analytical – than standing in the freezing cold on a demo waving a banner saying 'fuck this, fuck that'."

"You're really weird, you know?" She calls Chazzer on the walkie talkie, tells him she and I are making our way back to Goredale Bridge for a brew and the others should follow when they're ready. *Over*.

Roger, wilco, Boss... over.

"Come on," she says. "You need some sugar in you. You're going all strange on me."

"I'm fine, Al. I feel great."

Thus it is I find myself in pole position with Al, like an assistant walk-leader or something and, for once, ahead of the pack. I savour

the promotion. We clear the scar and saunter along the beck. The air tastes sweeter here, there's a greenness and a freshness and there's the chatter of the beck as the dale opens out. While the scar is impressive, there's something overwhelming about it, and when the senses have had their fill, it's never wise to linger lest the dragon whose lair it is turns you to stone. By contrast the beck speaks to me of expansiveness, of the interconnected nature of all things. It takes my heart and lifts it to the sky.

I know... I know... it will not last, this feeling of euphoria. It's utterly ridiculous. But for now, I'm going to enjoy it.

"You haven't really given up, have you?" she asks.

"On what?"

"That class struggle you talk about. Your politics. The environment. Saving the world."

"Well, like I said, it makes no difference now."

"I wish you wouldn't talk like that."

"Like what?"

"So... confidently pessimistic. We need people like you who'll fight, so the rest of us don't have to."

"Ah, the voice of the apathetic majority. Of the last man. And why not? The Right's too powerful now. It's obvious. And, given their wealth, it's inevitable, I suppose. They also have a wire right inside our heads. They can dial up whatever emotion, whatever prejudice they want.

"If we take the broader view, then, we can see these are the pre-fascist times in the west, times like we've seen before in history, like my great aunt Annie knew in the twenties, but also times like we've never seen, not in their power and their sweep, and amplified by technology, by that wire in our brains. It's like a pandemic, like this bug we hear's coming out of China now, except its a psychological contagion, as well as pathogenic.

"The best I can say is we'll be okay, you and me – we're too old and too white to stand out in the England of the next decade. If we keep our mouths shut, we'll be fine. My only vulnerability now is my kids – both young enough still to be drafted into some insanely concocted war. So, like I said, I'm done. And though I know we're staring down the barrel of a climate gun, and at best thirty years is all we've got, I'm really starting to feel great. I mean since I stopped being so... angry."

"And since you slept with Lottie. But what'll you do with

yourself?"

"Do? Well, I aim to be as active as I can. Walk with you lot for as long as my legs will carry me. I should also find myself an uncomplicated lover and shag my way into my seventies. Don't you feel it, Al? It's in the air... like wine; it's in the light and the rocks and the sound of running water. Freedom, the joy of living. And we should drink of it until we're drunk."

"You really are on something."

"No... you feel it too, I know you do. It's a kind of euphoria. It's everywhere. Describe it to me..."

"What, oh... okay. The trees, whispering to each other. The grass... I mean the sigh of the grass. Love that, don't you?"

"Yes, I do. You're getting it. You're tuning in."

She laughs. "Well, it won't be me, that uncomplicated lover, though I really wish I could, if only to stop you from sleeping with Lottie."

"Oh... but you promised, Al."

"No way. A night with me would bring you crashing back down to earth and all its nihilism and pointlessness again. No, I take it back. You should throw caution to the winds. Lottie's your girl. I don't know what happened round at her place but it's worked wonders. It's sent you stratospheric. When you walked into Campsmart that day I saw a man broken in spirit. 'There's a man who needs a damned good walk,' I thought to myself."

"I know you did, and thank you. You were right."

"But that's all I can offer, isn't it? A walk. A journey. Winter on the hill."

"What's more lasting and precious, Al? A quick shag, or all of that, what you said. You underestimate yourself, you know? I wish I knew what I could do to cheer *you* up."

"Okay well... look, really I don't care if you sleep with Lottie. It's nothing to do with me after all, but I'd be sorry if I thought it might stop you from thinking of me as a friend, stop, loving me, like you put it, in that way – though I'm hoping you love me differently to all the other Autumn Tints."

"I do. And I did not sleep with Lottie."

"Okay, so stop going on about it,"

"It's you who keeps bringing it up."

"So shut up then, and buy me a brew."

Chapter Twenty Six

Februaries of late years have been a month of storms. We get as many as two or three in succession, battering in off the Atlantic, bringing gales and rain the likes of which seem every season to break new records. Our Malham trip has taken place in the brief window afforded by the eye of one such storm. This required careful planning and flexibility, but mainly by paying attention to the Met Office, whose supercomputers now predict the seriously wet-stuff to within a half hour, and from several days out. But today the tail end of it picks up speed, and the weather begins to change ahead of time.

I felt it first in the movement of the trees as I finished up my brew with Al at Goredale Bridge. We'd shared a Kit-Kat and spoke of other things, of family, of former work – she of teaching, me of measuring things with lasers. And as we talked, the whisper of the grass fell quiet as the wind changed direction, gathered strength, and then the trees began to creak like old bones. You take the balminess of the seasons when it's on offer, while accepting the natural world can also be angrier than one's prepared for, and at such times there's really no arguing against it. Nor is there ever such a thing now as a settled time, both materially and metaphorically.

"Change coming."

Al nods, reaches for the Acme Thunderer.

The blue has turned to a solid steely grey by the time Chaz comes up to the carpark with the tail enders. Al speaks to him briefly, counts everyone back, then climbs into the Beast with me, and where Bazzer is already asleep across the back seat. Heavy splats of rain are starting to hit. It has the look and the feel of a big one. We're back off the hill just in time to avoid a soaking.

She'd driven to his place at Grindleton that morning, and I'd met them there. She'd planned to drive us all to Malham to meet the others, but Bazzer had complained Al's car was too small to be comfortable with all the gear, which was probably true. But she'd judged, probably also correctly, he'd still be carrying alcohol in his blood from the night before, so there was no way she was getting in a car with him behind the wheel.

As I listened to them bicker, they'd seemed to me then like an

old married couple, unable to live with or without the other – more certainly on Bazzer's part, though I suspect Al was trying the more successfully to overcome him. If this was wishful thinking on my part, I do not know. Anyway, even though the Beast is not to her liking, on environmental grounds, she accepted it was better if I drove.

The weather catches up with us on the A59 at Clitheroe, homeward bound, when I feel the Beast wobble from a gusty broadside. The sky is black and then, of a sudden, the road ahead vaporises as the rain is thrown hard enough to burst. The Beast rides it out solidly, I adjust our speed down to what I can see ahead, which isn't much. Al has settled back comfortably against the door-post, closed her eyes for a nod, unzipped her fleece and opened her shirt a little to let the heat of her body out. I catch the exotic wave of a floral scent, mingled then with fart from the back.

I open the window a crack and drive on.

There's flash flooding here and there, water pouring from the meadows and pooling in pockets. And when we reach the M6, there are cars spun off to the embankments after aquaplaning, six lanes like a river. They were trying to do ninety, when even forty feels to me like the edge of my seat. Once again there's this sense of running headlong without a care, or much aforethought for the consequences.

And then, just as I'm thinking we're nearly home, there's a flood a couple of feet deep at Grindleton Bottoms, a notorious black-spot in stormy weather, where the moor vents itself through a normally modest brook, but which has now risen confidently and obstinately to cover the road. The Beast wades in and makes light work of it. I know at some point my conscience is going to make me get rid of this absurdly brutish vehicle, but I'm going to miss it for the security it grants in the climate storms I know have yet to hit us properly. Yes, I know, I sound like a survivalist, or a prepper, now, but that's the same as in the old cold war days, thinking you could ever outride that storm, should it ever hit. But then, same as now, your only choice is to die fast or slow. I know which I'd prefer.

Bazzer is awake by now and urging Al not to drive home, but to wait the storm out at his place. She tells him she has to get back – things to do and all that – though I can tell from her tone she's merely being evasive, wary of him taking advantage perhaps, or at any rate, finding herself on a return path to somewhere it's taken

her a while to distance herself from.

"I'll be fine," she says.

I pull up outside his place and leave them both to it, turning a deaf ear to Bazzer's continuing complaint, and her evasiveness, though my personal view is if someone says no, it's at the very least bad manners to press on.

I was wondering if we could count on your vote, sir?

Yea right, you commie bastard. Fuck off.

Sorry to have bothered you, sir.

Anyway...

They're pretty much soaked, the pair of them before they've even got their gear out of the back. Al gives me a look, but says nothing, and I can't interpret it. It's not my place to pick sides, or advocate between them, and I hope she isn't expecting me to. A man fights his corner. No reason why a woman shouldn't too, and from what I've seen Al can look after herself.

So, all of that was an hour ago, and now I'm in the lounge at the Drinkhouse, listening still to the roar of a ferocious rain against the windows. At one time, you might have expected such a deluge as this in short bursts, but nothing as sustained – hour after hour of it – a month's rain all at once.

It's rolling down the moors, forming streams where there were none before, and the sphagnum bogs that were once perfectly adequate at sponging it all up, are overwhelmed and let the water go roaring down to the plain, overtopping the rivers, lifting the grids, spilling sludge and sewage into homes, ruining lives. I watch the Beast, out on the drive, rocking a little in the wind, a silver halo all around it where the rain hits with force, the driveway running with water and the night coming on. I'd like to say the old house has seen much worse in the centuries of its occupancy of this spot, but these are strange times, and I doubt it has. If the chimney pots survive till morning, it'll be a miracle.

So anyway, I've filled the washing machine with my muddied kit, padded upstairs, butt naked, for a hot bath. I am more often naked when alone since my time at Lottie's, more comfortable in my skin. I gave her my e-mail address. Did I tell you that? Before I left, I gave to it her and she accepted it, though she's not written to me. I check every morning and evening. I don't know why, or what I expect her to say.

Come round, Rick. Come swim in my pool. Reveal yourself to me

again.

Or is it:

People are liars, Rick. They can't help it. Nothing is true to them any more. Especially now. We are all post truth. Post fact. So how can we let them in?...

Yes, I still have that note. It's on my desk.

Don't waste time and life, just talking.

Dance, man. Dance!

Now, I'm at the keyboard, having put on some comfy old pyjamas, and having made a ready-meal for my tea. Too much salt in them, I know, but I've lost a lot today with sweating on the hike, so I reason I need to put some back. The burner is crackling snugly, a pile of sweetly scented logs in the basket to see me through until morning. Sure, the storm is fierce, but thus far I'm holding my own.

Actually, I'm hovering over the delete button on my old blog, after musing over those years of politicking. My last piece was a polemic against the mendaciousness of the Right's election campaign, and a rallying cry to the left... that was just before the election and our crushing defeat. Needless to say, my earnestness embarrasses me now. No one has liked my junk, but it has picked up a number of comments, none of them friendly and each translates roughly as: the Fascists know where I live, and will burn my house down. My thoughts are incompatible with my continued existence. The mob is enabled, and they are coming for me.

Delete? No, let it stand. Let their words shame them, should the sun ever rise again.

I catch a snippet of current affairs. This superbug is spreading out of China pretty fast now. They've got quarantine measures in place, tens of thousands sick, thousands reported dead. It's feeding in with other news of the latest immigration controls, and that old fascist trope regarding the uncleanliness of foreigners. I wonder how our creaking NHS will cope if it reaches the UK, and which ethnic group will be most scapegoated.

Politically, the direction of travel is clearer now with each passing day, while socially, existentially, we are as bewildered and as starved of hope as we ever were. But now there is no potential for redemption in the future either, because there is no future.

Well, do you care?

Don't look at me. I'm out. And for the first time in my life, I think I'm happy. I think I'm seriously content with my lot – obviously tempting a

fall, but not yet. Not yet.

There's a car pulling up on the drive beside the beast now. This is unexpected, a cowled figure running by the window, a sudden hammering at the door. I keep a pick-axe handle by the door. Seriously. It's made of hickory, hard as iron. I have it to hand as I check through the peep-hole.

It's okay. It's Al. She's soaked and shivering.

"Couldn't get home," she says. "The roads have all gone under. Took me ages, cars everywhere. Gridlock. All the traffic lights are out in town. I didn't know what to do. Yours was the only place I could get to. Can you put up with me for the night?"

Surely though, if she can get to my place, she can also get to Bazzer's, unless she discounted it for other reasons. Don't knock it, Rick, and try not to look too pleased either.

Is this for real?

"Of course. Hell, Al, you're wet through. Bathroom's upstairs. Get a hot shower or something. You can chuck your stuff in the washing machine on top of mine – it's just through there. I'll find you a dressing gown and some PJ's."

"Thanks. I know this is a bit weird. I mean a bit awkward."

"Not at all, Boss. It's a bad night."

And then I'm thinking, never before have I considered a washing machine the height of eroticism, or perhaps it's just my age, though I decide I shall not look inside of it this time. I shall not enquire of her smalls as they swim with mine. It might be more than I can bear.

I settle another log on the burner, find her my dressing gown, and a pair of my best, clean PJ's, the ones I save for holidays, leave them outside the bathroom door for her. I hear the shower running. Al is in my shower. In my house. Are the Gods having a laugh?

So, I'm in the kitchen wondering what to make for her tea, when she walks in wearing my PJ's and dressing-gown, the one Mel bought for me from British Home Stores in its final closing down sale. She looks dry and fresh and cosy.

"This place doesn't seem half as creepy on the inside as it does on the outside," she says.

"Em, thanks. I knew you found it creepy. So, will it be Lasagne, or bangers and beans on toast?"

"Ooh... how did you know? bangers and beans, please!"

I resolve not to tell her about the ghosts. Discussion of sleeping

arrangements is also deferred. My couch is not wide enough to sleep on, and I have no spare room – at least not one with a bed in it. I'm not sure how to bring that one up yet.

Distraction, prevarication: "Em... super walk today then, Al?"

"Yes, yes it was good."

"Chose our weather, eh?"

"Sure did." There's a slightly awkward pause and then she says: "So... this penguin walks into a bar."

"What's that? A penguin?"

"Yes, a penguin, and he says have you seen my brother? And the barman says, I dunno, what's he look like?"

"Ha! Very funny. Okay. This horse walks into a pub and the barman says, hey, why the long face?"

Groan. "Got to be drunk to laugh at that one. Know any Elephant jokes?"

"Loads. I love elephant jokes. Why do elephants paint their toe-nails red?"

"That's easy: so they can hide in cherry trees. How do you know you've just passed an elephant?"

"Em... dunno."

"Can't get the toilet seat down."

"Argh... that's disgusting."

It makes me laugh though. Then I sober slightly, the rain still lashing like it will never stop, and I'm imagining all the fertile earth washed out to sea by morning, leaving nothing but a sterile bedrock. We really are fucked, aren't we? So how come I feel so good? Is it simply that I'm standing here in my kitchen with Al, and she's wearing my pyjamas?

"This is crazy," I tell her.

"Isn't it. I'm sorry, Rick."

"Sorry?"

"For breaking in on your solitude like this, trespassing into your man-cave."

"Oh... there's no trespass here. You have the right to roam."

"Spoken like a true socialist. But speaking of roaming, and setting all prevarication aside, I've already had a snoop around. No spare bed, and only a two seater sofa in the living room. So?..."

"Yea well, don't worry, there's no way you're sleeping on that."

"No. And neither are you."

Chapter Twenty Seven

There's a line of keepers coming over the hill, twelve of them, standing out like skittles against an ominously swirling iron-grey sky. They're all in tweeds, knee britches and deerstalker hats, and they're carrying big sticks.

"Would you look at that, Mick?"

"It's Rick, Baz."

"Eh?"

"Never mind. Let's call it a day. We'll not make the summit now, there's too many of them."

I don't know where we are. It could be Black hill, but I've a feeling we're further south, down towards Kinder, or over to the east, maybe, towards Scout Moor in the days before the turbines came. Which makes me what? Twenty five? Thirty?

Yea right, I wish!

Baz loads a stone into his catapult and takes aim, drops a keeper like he's shooting ducks at the fair. He'll go to prison for that, and so will I. It gives the keepers pause but they stand their ground. Baz is already loading up again, lets fly, knocks off a keeper's hat.

It's no secret the way estates make money from wannabes aping nineteenth century toffs, shooting birds, bred in their tens of thousands for the gun. But they're getting aggressive in their pursuit of it these days as their profits wane, and they're increasingly utilitarian in their land-management, opening up the dykes and burning the heather, which is good for the grouse but bad for flooding in the towns below. And as the climate worsens, and the rains increase, at a time when the moors could be re-wilded to sponge up the deluge, they're being turned against us.

"Leave it Baz. We'll try another time, eh?"

"Another time won't do, Mick. It's now or never, mate. You know that. Weather's turning for the worse. We have to act. And act now."

There's a fire in him, which is impressive, but also worrying because it's irrational and unbridled, and it's driven by whatever bad blood there is between him and Al. He won't leave it alone, drops another keeper, so then another line of them appear from behind, this time with dogs, and they let them go. Given Bazzer's proficiency with that catapult, you can't blame them. We're done for then. The good news is we're not going to prison. The bad news is

we're going to die. And horribly.

Baz bursts into song:

Days in the sun and the tempered wind and the air like wine...

I make ready the dog stabber, futile as it is, knock the rubber foot from the spike, but I can't take them all on. There must be a half dozen dogs and just the two of us. Meanwhile Baz sings his lungs out, drowns out the barking. I shove the stabber into the earth, lean on the handle like a shepherd at rest.

Fuck it.

I'd always hoped it would be on a hill, on a fresh spring day like this, with the larks rising and the curlew calling. Not dogs though. Dogs terrify me. Heart attack perhaps, something quick and clean but not torn limb from limb like an exhausted fox that couldn't make it to ground, with some death-cult prick in hunting-pink looking on all smug.

There's no honour in that.

Maybe, if we could only,...

"Rick... Rick..."

"Hmm?"

It's Al, rocking me awake, and not too gently.

Yes, yes... I was dreaming, and I'd be relieved by that, except I've a feeling the dream was telling me something, because it's left a log-jam in my thoughts and set me on edge. Something about honour. Giving up. Weather turning. Taking the bastards on.

But what else can I do, Annie? The whole Zeitgeist is against us.

Wait a minute... I'm in bed... with Al?

Yes. Remember?

"Em... you okay, Al?"

I can barely make her out in the dark. She smells good, smells sweet and smoky, and there's that tremendous heat in her which seems to lend her always such a head of steam. How did it ever come to this? I finally get a woman in my bed who isn't Mel, and I'm asleep in five minutes never having so much as kissed her goodnight. But it's fine. I was married for a long time so it's normal, this sort of thing, or at least it is to me, and if she's put out by any of that, she's not letting on. I only hope I wasn't snoring, or squeaking out farts – being unused to sharing my bed. I'd definitely be embarrassed about that.

"I can hear voices," she says.

"Was I mumbling? Sorry."

"No, downstairs."

"Oh, that. That's just the wind."

"It's definitely voices. Lots of them."

"It's fine... honestly. Want me to take a look?"

"You mean, otherwise you'd be happy to just lie there?"

"Usually."

I make to move, and then the phone's ringing. Al twitches. "Jeeze what's that?"

"Phone."

"What kind of phone makes a noise like that?"

"Just an old one. It came with the house. I think it's from the sixties. I'm amazed it still works. Loud, isn't it? You can even hear it in the garden – not that many people ring me."

"Except now at half past two in the morning?"

"Fax machine, I think. It's a problem. Happens all the time. I usually disconnect the phone at night. I'll go down and sort it out, or it'll ring again."

Well, I'm hoping its a fax machine, and not some pre-programmed instrument – function: wake Rick randomly in the small hours. Obviously that's a paranoid line of thinking which I don't share with Al. Instead I disconnect the phone from the socket in the hallway. Meanwhile, she's followed me downstairs, and peers cautiously into the living room.

"It's just the wind, like I said. It sounds like voices, but you can never make out any words."

"Are you telling me your house is haunted?"

"Well, it could be I suppose,... it's an old house after all – and you did say it looks creepy. I'm sure there must be plenty of ghosts who'd be at home here."

"I was joking."

"I know. But it always pays to have an open mind."

"It doesn't worry you?"

"That it might be haunted? No, the dead don't worry me."

"Does anything?"

"Em... right wing nut-jobs mostly? They scare me to death. And women, but not in the same way. Obviously."

"You realise you're going to have to explain that remark?"

"About right wing nut-jobs?"

"No, about women. Shall I make tea while you're thinking about it?"

"Em... it's pretty late, Al. Don't you have work in the morning?"

"No. It's Sunday."

"Ah. I tend to lose track since I retired. In which case, why not? Tea's sounds good. I'll make it."

"No, let me. You go back to bed. I want to have a nosey round your kitchen, make sure you're feeding yourself all right, and you're cleaning your work-tops properly."

I'm sure all of this sounds implausible, and you'll have to forgive me for that, but then I don't have to take account of your expectations regarding the relations between men and women, nor excuse my and Al's eccentricities – least of all our accumulated lifetimes of neuroses. Really, I don't know at what point in my later life I crossed this Rubicon. All I know is it felt perfectly natural, sliding into bed with her and going to sleep. After all, she'd already told me we could be nothing more than friends on account of certain intimate difficulties that she has, and friends do not fondle. They do not cosy up in bed. They keep to their side like an old married couple, and try not to disturb the other as they turn.

And so it was. And so it is.

She returns now with tea, sets mine on the night-stand, slides back into bed, tucks her knees up to her chest.

"So, women trouble you, you said?"

"Did I?"

"In what way?"

"Oh... I don't know why I said that – I was joking."

"No you weren't. Try me. You can talk to me."

Can I? Really? We'll see.

Never had a true friend who was a woman... not even Mel. Never had a bloke who was one either, but that says more about me than anyone else.

"Well... okay... my wife wanted kids. I wanted sex. As soon as the kids came along, she didn't want sex any more. Turns out sex was a necessary unpleasantness, one to be got over. I thought it was just us, but as I've grown older I see it a lot in other couples too, other relationships. It's like when the woman becomes a mother, she moves on and gets her fulfilment through the kids, and then the guy might as well be dead.

"So then the kids grow up, leave home and she looks around, and if the guy's still there, she wonders what she ever saw in him, so she turns into a scold, as if to unconsciously drive him out the

house. But she never does, not quite... always draws back from the coup de grace, because otherwise she'd have no meaning in life either, other than to torment this poor supine creature she once loved.

"And then again, as I've got older, I don't bother about it as much – the sex I mean. But then I get to wondering, what if there are women who really do enjoy it for the sake of it, and what the hell would I do if I ever met one? So yes... even an old celibate like me gets uneasy and embarrassed around women, in case they're one of those who like sex, and don't want kids and take their men seriously as both lovers and men. And how the hell would I cope with that?"

Are you really lying in bed with Al, talking about your wife? Well, what else is there to do at two in the morning? And that woman, the one who enjoys sex for the sake of it? You've already met her. And you're hiding from her, remember?

Oh, you mean Rachel... sure okay. Well spotted. But I'm not sure she ever took me seriously as a man. She just wanted to turn me into a different man to the one I am.

Al takes sip of her tea, lays back against the pillows, smiling, and thinks on this a while. At least I've not offended her. And anyway, how can you offend anyone if you're trying to be honest?

"Well, get to a certain age, Rick, and a woman can't have kids any more, and doesn't want them. And I'm sorry if it was that way for you. Women aren't perfect. We make mistakes. We can be cruel, cold, unsuited to marriage, unbelievably stupid in our relations with men, and in our choices of men. And yes, sometimes we turn into heartless scolds, maybe as a reaction to an irreconcilable disappointment, or just the same existential angst as everyone else, just like some men turn into abusive bastards and drunks. But it sounds to me like you're more one of those Incel guys."

"Eh?"

"You know, celibate but not of their own choosing. Had your chance, you'd be shagging every woman who smiled at you, and after a marriage like that who could blame you?"

"I would not! Not shagging you, am I?"

"Only because you know you can't."

"No... well partly that, but also I respect you, and even if you could, right now you're at a bit of a disadvantage here, and it wouldn't be decent of me to bring that up."

"Disadvantage?" she laughs. "Not so's I'd noticed. Bursting in on your evening, wangling a free meal, hot shower and a warm bed for the night. Got you wrapped around my little finger, I think."

"Yes... you do rather." I have to think on all of that for a bit. "Look, you're wrong. I mean about that Incel thing. Incels don't really like women. I do. They just puzzle me. It would be more of a problem, more frustrating I mean, if I were twenty five than it is now. No, right now it's more like: what am I for, Al? You try to make a difference in the world, then realise in your middle years it's unlikely anyone so much as knows you're alive. Now I've a couple of decades left before I'm really old, and what difference can a guy make then?"

Okay, so now we're safely off the subject of women, and nicely played Rick but...

"Plenty time to make a difference to yourself," she says. "Change the world that way."

"How?"

"Change yourself, you change the way you see the world, don't you? I mean, the world just is what it is. Best we can do is find a way to fit in and not be so angry all the time, and that's down to how we see things. Not that you are – angry I mean. Not any more, which brings us back to the subject of Lottie. I remember looking at you up on Holcombe Moor that time and you had a face like slapped arse. Crisis brewing I thought. Then you drive off with Lottie and the next time I see you... well, you've got a grin on you like the Cheshire cat. So what exactly did you and she get up to?"

Am I really close enough to Al to share this? Are we really friends of such an intimate nature, trusting confidants? Or am I merely wrapped around her little finger, like she said? Well, we're in bed together aren't we? which means we're trusting each other in some strange way not to press for a thing neither of us says we want – even though I suspect we both want it, and yes, her too, even if she can't, physically. So yes, while dancing barefoot on all these hot coals, I think we are trusting enough with one another.

"You tell me first what Bazzer, did to upset you?"

"Oooh! You know about me and him?"

"A bit, not much, obviously. Only that you were together and something went wrong."

"Not sure I want to go there, actually."

"Okay. Fair's fair. Not sure I want to explore the me and Lottie

thing either."

"Ooh. Pig. So you really want to know?"

"I guess."

"Not squeamish, are you?"

"Maybe... but go on."

"Well, to be blunt, he kept wanting to take me up the arse."

"You mean? Instead of..." She's right, I really rather I'd not asked now.

"Exactly," she says. "My fault, I suppose."

"No, absolutely *not* your fault. Jeeze Baz,..."

"Oh, don't blame Bazzer. He's an old soldier, randy as they come – always was. Not the first time he's done that with a girl for sure. And I should have been clearer with him from the outset. I mean, like I was with you. I led him on – or rather I didn't swerve him soon enough. But it seemed a logical enough solution to him, when all else had failed. But there was no way we could carry on after that was there? because it was obvious he needed some kind of penetrative consummation, if you'll pardon my French. Is that a thing with all men. I wonder?"

"Maybe, I don't know. My expectations are somewhat lower now than they used to be."

"Okay... your turn. So you did get up to something, you and Lottie? You didn't just drink tea."

"We didn't just drink tea, no."

"I knew it! So?"

"I swam naked in her pool, while she watched."

Al chokes on her tea, splutters some back, sits red eyed and coughing for a while. "What?"

"We didn't do anything else. I just swam for a bit. It was lovely, actually."

"You mean afterwards, you didn't?...."

"No... absolutely not."

"But Rick,... that's so,..."

"What? Unlikely? Weird?"

"No, no... Erotic! That's so incredibly... *erotic*!"

"I suppose it was, yes. You won't tell anyone, will you?"

"Don't be stupid. Will you be seeing her again?"

"I don't know. It was kind-of spontaneous. I'm guessing that's just how it is with Lottie. But she's not, you know... lacking anywhere. There's a depth to her. I felt... liberated, you know? Like I wanted

her to see me as I truly am – metaphorically, I mean. She seemed to know that..."

"You, think about her?"

"About her, yes... and *it*... what we did. I think about that a lot, actually. Oh, I'm under no illusions. She's complicated, and quite possibly dangerous. And I don't see Lottie with a man. Any man. Not permanently. And least of all me."

I'm not sure if that's true.

"Well," she says. "That's something to sleep on for sure."

"I guess so."

But I'm not sure if we do sleep much after that. Al's a quick settler, settles on her back in an instant and barely moves all night, while I'm a bit of a shuffler and tend to curl up on my side, Al to my back, obviously, as I wouldn't want to be breathing all over her. She feels closer now, warmer, smells sweeter, smokier and for an instant I'm sure I feel her hand on my waist, fluttering lightly and then it's drawn back, as if in surprise at her own spontaneity. She might have let it lay there and I would not have reacted, but savoured until dawn that touch, though it might well have been imagined or dreamed.

I suppose what it is is I'm drifting in myself, a lone, unaffiliated, ageing male. And what I want is what I've always wanted – for a woman to take possession of me, to want me. For Al to have let her hand lie there all night would have been a sign of tacit possession, and I would have yielded to it. But does it even work that way between men and women any more? Are they not just waiting themselves to be wanted? I don't know. As usual, the older I get, the more I realise I know nothing at all.

When I see her again, she's dressed and drinking coffee in the kitchen, looking shy.

The rain has stopped, and the sun is shining.

Chapter Twenty Eight

Junction six, Walkden, M61 South. The Beast is purring down to the line from the off-slip. The grassed embankments on either side are awash here with a tide of rubbish. It's where people wind their windows down while they wait for the lights to change, then toss out the waste packaging of Macmeals, miscellaneous wrappers, sachets, plastic bottles, beer-cans, and all those little nitrous oxide cartridges. This morning there are also nappies, tee-shirts, and a pair of trousers snagged in the bushes. It's places like this we void ourselves of the over-consumption, despoil any vestige of green.

How can the natural world take this? Any other creature that fouls its own nest like we do lasts barely the blink of an eye.

So why are we still here?

Why prolong the agony?

We are simply embarrassing ourselves.

The guy in the white van beside me is wearing a surgical mask and rubber gloves. He catches my fleeting double-take and responds with a finger. He's either about to rob a bank or he's paranoid about infection. This virus is beginning to spook everyone now. I'm not sure if it's warranted or just scare-mongering in the press. Hard to tell. We've had years of one thing or another, and seem, as a people, permanently jittery, jaded and sceptical, yet paradoxically suggestible, and vulnerable to manipulation.

So far as I can gather from my limited tolerance for current affairs these days, there are only a handful of cases in the UK as yet, though I suppose it's only a matter of time before that explodes. The challenge is to isolate against it, have it die out. Worst case it becomes endemic and circulates permanently in the population, scything through us in annual waves. It's more deadly than flu, kills one percent, they say. The government seems willing to tolerate an infection rate of 60%, thus allowing herd-immunity, but on that basis, simple arithmetic suggests at least quarter of a million of us are going to die.

Can that be right?

For now share-indices are plummeting, and the smart money is buying up bargains while prices are low. Astonishing, how a virus can mutate randomly into such a deadly coherence, and be half-way round the world in the blink of an eye. Yet with all our superior

faculties, we cannot even protect our poor from cold and starvation.

Well, we can... we just don't.

I'm out this way on the edge of Greater Manchester's conurbation, having come to see my old boss and mentor, Chester, who I find sitting now in the corner of the day room at the care-home, oxygen mask at the ready in case of breathlessness. Access was not the usual informality. I was interviewed briefly by Anita, the duty care-worker, who looks about twelve years old. She asked me if I had visited China or Italy recently, or did I feel unwell? Since I have not and did not, I was admitted. I took care to squirt my hands with the gel-stuff, as per habit, or rather I would have done, but the dispenser was empty, and Anita told me they had run out. There was no chance of resupply either, she added ruefully, and the country was running out of surgical masks, and gloves, all of which has left me wondering if I am missing something.

If this bug gets into the care-homes, our old folks are done for.

Anyway, he was quite the thing in his day, old Ches – sat on committees that determined international standards, so engineers around the world could speak the same language – well, except for you Yanks who prefer still to talk in feet and inches, which we Europeans find rather quaint.

Yes, I do still consider myself European.

He looks a little more sunken into himself than the last time I saw him, and his chest is wheezy, the fags catching up with him, but he's eighty-five now and not had a bad run for someone of his questionable habits. It's only in these last years when everything seems to have fallen apart for him: wife passed on suddenly, his knees gone to arthritis, hands curling up the same, the breath being squeezed out of him as if by a weight on his chest.

He has kids somewhere round the other side of the world. They come and sit and stare at him once a year like he's a stranger, like I suppose my kids will one day do to me, if I'm lucky. In olden days and other ways of working, there would be ample opportunity for his kids to live and work closer to home, and the generations would co-habit, tend to each other more closely and with greater compassion than we do now. But he's better off than me in that respect. I've no idea where my kids are, or what they're doing. I send cards out for birthdays, but I'm not even sure I have the right addresses for them any more – they move around so much with their work. And their emails have started bouncing back. It has left

me feeling empty, disconnected.

I've always looked at Chester as a way of gauging my own prospects, physically, I mean, at some point in the future, and lately these visits have begun to focus my thoughts on contingencies.

He was always what we used to call a middle-of-the-road Tory, worth debating intelligently, and with the prospect of a genuine and intellectually weighty challenge to one's own beliefs. Of late though he has caught the fever of racism to which, like flu, his generation seems particularly prone. He has discovered an especial dislike of Eastern Europeans, though seems not to have noticed most of the smiling, happy, compassionate kids looking after him in here are from that part of the world.

He has also matured, naturally enough, into an arch Brexiteer, still salivating for a no-deal bum's rush to the Continent, and presumably a return to wartime rationing too, which I cannot believe anyone who really remembers it, remembers fondly. Given my own leanings in the opposite direction, we tend to avoid talk of such matters now, speak instead of technical things, as if we were still in the business of measuring, and making things, and that we matter in the world.

It's an act then, yes, but he thrives on the illusion of it, lighting up as we converse.

Do you remember old so and so?...

But people are such liars, Rick. They lie to each other. All the time.

Yes Lottie, it's true, we do. Sometimes it's the only way we can get along.

For myself, the difficulty once lay in the fact I had transcended this illusion, looked over the garden wall, so to speak, and found only desolation on the other side, discovered that an obsession with worldly matters was merely a distraction from something more important.

Without adequate grounding in some spiritual tradition that can be a depressing thing for a man to have to deal with. But then I remind myself how, more lately, I find myself walking on air instead of eggshells. Can it really be as simple as that? Is Nirvana no more than the ability to be comfortable with others. Whoever they are?

This care-home is the worst of one's imaginings, the bare minimum of what is humane, yet in just a few years, with its luxury hotel prices it has stripped Chester of his life's savings, and the

house it took him a quarter-century to buy. It has also diminished him from respected technocrat, to just another dribbling, penniless geriatric. Meanwhile, the kids who actually keep Ches clean and fed are treated appallingly, while the owners cream the rewards – also fleecing the local authority for every penny of the dwindling social care budget they can get...

Enough, Rick. No one wants to hear this stuff any more.

"So, how's Mel then?" asks Ches.

Mel? He forgets. "Oh, she's fine, Ches."

"Kids doing all right?"

"As far as I know."

No sense in burdening him with the complexity of contemporary events; he would only live afresh their sorrows and forget them until the next time he was reminded. Thus we explore an imaginary world, a past world where everything's all right, and everyone's doing fine.

"I blame these immigrants," he says.

Ah... we're falling back on that one already. He no longer knows why or for what the immigrant deserves blame. But the worm is in his brain and even as the rest of his faculties decline, it thrives, put there by the vile newspapers he reads. Why does the left not troll the newspapers? What are we afraid of? Is it only disgracing ourselves by behaving without honour? I suppose it must be. If the Right threatened to burn our houses we would respond with buckets, not fire of our own.

But then the true left has never held power for long.

You don't even know what the true left is, Rick. You're still fighting the industrial battles and the downsizing of the nineties through the obsolete optics of a union man.

Dear old Chester. Were it not for the encouragement of men like this, in their better days, it would have been harder to find my feet, harder to find that rung on the ladder from the working class grind my own parents knew, to middle class affluence, and retirement at fifty seven. Now of course the ladder's been kicked away, and I am having to forgive my mentor for growing old, for losing himself to the noise and bombast and the general nationalistic malaise of our times. And, of course, for becoming a casual racist.

"So... feeding you all right then, Ches?"

"What's that, Rick?"

"Food, Ches. Food all right?"

"Crap. Wouldn't give it me dog."

Same old story. Get us away from our golden past and there is only complaint.

You have to stay useful, Rick.

Yes, Annie. I know. But I leave politics for other men now, rather than sully myself with it. And you're right, I don't understand the world any more. I don't understand the Left. But what else can I usefully do?

Chester doesn't stay awake for very long these days. An hour is an achievement according to Anita. Thus I find the light going out of him and myself at the wrong end of the county and for no more reason than a pudding of lies. Through the windows I note there is by now a steady fall of sleet, so the '61 will be a pain of poor visibility, and speeding nut-jobs in their tit-mobiles. I sit a-while, wondering if the staff will mind my loitering. Ches begins to snore. Does he dream in milder tones or do the demons follow him there too?

It still bothers me, that dream of mine... the one with me and Baz trying to get to the top of that nameless hill, and the keepers barring access, and then Baz with his catapult and them setting the dogs on us. It bothers me because in the dream it looked like I'd given up. I'd sunk my stabber into the earth and was waiting for the hounds to tear me limb from limb. And I really didn't mind, but the dream seemed to be telling me that wasn't much of a virtue. But neither would taking as many of their dogs with me as I could. In the hunt, the fox might run to ground and think himself safe. But then the hunters send their terriers down the holes to drive us out.

.... and the air like wine. And we drink, and we drink till we're drunk on the joy of living.

But where is the joy?...

In that?

I miss Al. Even though it's only days since I saw her, my mind teases me into thinking of it as a lifetime. For all my apparent stoicism, I am lonely for her, and for the night we spent together. It's not that I mind the loneliness so much – all introverts must come to terms with that eventually – but that night certainly added an extra depth to be savoured And I would like to think of her as the ground I have run to. Except when we think of running to ground we think of somewhere warm and snug, and one could hardly call Al snug. She is the more the stiff breeze on the hill-top, the sharp tang of mountain air.

Before parting from the care-home, I enter into conversation with Anita. She's worried the new immigration rules the Tory press are crowing about will mean having to give up her job, which she enjoys, and for all its poor pay is still better than anything she could get at home. I worry the black economy awaits people like Anita. She's a pretty girl and the dark money likes nothing more than to fuck with pretty girls.

"Are you unionised here?"

She does not know what a trades union is. I give her the name of a rep I used to know, tell her to get her and her colleagues to unionise fast, and to seek advice, for at least as members they will have recourse to the law at no cost to themselves. It's my first act of resistance since leaflet-stuffing during the campaign last year and, though it's probably futile, it still feels good.

While I'm doing all of this I fail to notice the figure loitering outside in the entranceway, waiting. Only when I leave and hold open the door for her, thinking she has come to visit, do I realise who she is and even then I cannot quite believe it.

"Rachel?"

Chapter Twenty Nine

I have not seen her for months, and though we have been lovers, I am now mindful that we never actually slept together, as Al and I have slept together. She always found it inconvenient, even if it meant one or the other of us driving home in the small hours of the morning – never a warm bed for us to linger in. I am also struck by how good she looks and inevitably, by the memory of how good she looked without her clothes, and then it's only a short hop to remembering how well her body moved when she made love. She seems fiery still with that sparkle in her eye, smart-suited now in a corporate sort of way, wears a long coat, like for a funeral, stands tall, proud, confident.

She lectures at the university, and we are not far from there, but this is clearly not a coincidental meeting so, after that initial flutter of excitement at seeing her, my heart sinks and I discover once more I am afraid of her and the world she represents, the world of disquiet at the excesses of the monied, and having the courage to do something about it.

"Buy you a coffee?" she asks.

"Em, look, Rachel... it's great to see you but... I'm out. Okay? Seriously out. I'm not involved with the movement now."

"I know. Ten minutes. That's all."

"No more demos. I'm not waving placards and chanting like a fool in the middle of the road."

"I know. Neither am I."

"We might both have gone to prison – and you know what those places are like these days. Soft skinned people like us... we would have been torn to shreds."

"I get it. Really. You received my mail then... just didn't respond to it?"

"Yes, I got it."

"It's nothing to do with a demo. That mail I sent you... it was just... well an excuse to meet. I wanted to see you. About something else."

Does she want us to hook up again? I doubt that. I was certainly under the impression we had run out of road last time. Whatever the reason, this is no place to be discussing it. The sleet is thickening, mixed with hail and stinging our faces. There's a coffee

place across the road. We end up sitting in there like a couple of last-century toffs amid the jog pants and the sweat tops and the hoodies, and all the dreary tatts.

"How did you know I'd be here?"

"You're a creature of habit," she explains.

I had mentioned it to her once, my occasional visits to see Chester – and she had deduced from the visitor book I came once a month, and always on a Thursday morning, which is more than I had realised myself. How she talked her way in to look at that book I've no idea, but that's Rachel – good-looks and confidence. It has won her much and at little cost to herself.

I sit back and try to take her in: this political scientist, philosopher, firebrand activist. She might have been an MP, but found the idea too pedestrian. Still, if this woman cannot change the world, no-one can. She has suffered the same defeat as me, but while it has put my lights out, it has left hers undimmed.

"You took it hard, " she says. "We all did. We all went to ground for a bit. But the time for grief's over now. We're rebuilding. Learning the lessons. Next time we hit back hard. So... what are you up to now?"

"Eh? Oh... not much."

What does she mean, hit back hard?

"Your children all right?"

"Dunno."

"Nothing's changed there then. So... how are you filling your time?"

"Family history stuff. Bit of walking."

She is not much of a romantic – indeed not at all – and therefore has never had much time for family history, nor has she much of an opinion on it, other than its monetisation, with the appropriation of public records by private companies who sell them back to us. On that she has some very forthright views indeed.

"I joined a walking group."

"Ah..." She raises a hopeful eyebrow at that.

"No... they're not political any more," I tell her. "No more than a knitting or a Yoga group. That's not how it is these days. The woolly hats are all middle aged and middle class now. Not a member under sixty, not a communist or a socialist among them, not like in the old days."

She laughs at that. "Wait until they change the laws on trespass,

then the walking groups will have to get political again."

"I know, but that's a way off."

"Sooner than you think, I reckon. So tell your friends to be vigilant. To organise. Make friends with other groups. Lobby their MPs. By the way, I notice you've not been updating your blog."

"No one reads it."

"I read it. And you've blocked comments."

"There were only nut-jobs commenting. I want to get people a living wage. They want to burn my house down for saying it."

I'm more than defensive here. I'm becoming bitter again, the work of months evaporating. That was always the thing with Rachel, a simmering rage building between us to a head of steam that we would eventually quench with the most urgent sex imaginable, as if the anger itself were a kind of foreplay.

"So... you seeing anyone?"

If by seeing anyone she means... shagging... obviously: "Not really. You?"

"No."

If, however, she means am I in love with anyone... then possibly, yes, and in several places at the same time, and I intend enjoying that dance for as long as I can. But relationships are not Rachel's forte unless they are to be analysed for the fault-lines, so I do not divulge any further.

"Why are we here, Rachel?"

"Have you a phone on you?"

"What? No... I've given them up."

"We can talk safely then."

"Are you sure? You'll be on the same watch-list as me."

"True. But I don't think we'll be listened to in here. We're not important enough to warrant that kind of expense."

"Okay... so?"

"We're going after the right-wing social media trolls. And the press."

"We?"

"A small group, working out of the university."

"Are you kidding? Good luck with that. Aren't most of the trolls bots these days? I mean... it's a state-sponsored industry."

"Industrial bots, yes. But we've been developing our own... in the department. Research into deep learning. Our bot searches the social media comments, takes them on. I mean factually,

linguistically, logically. It can also track dark ads and click-bait back to their source, and block them."

"Block them?"

"Distributed denial of service."

"Your bot can handle all of that? That's impressive. Not strictly legal though, is it?"

"It's a grey area. We were primarily interested in climate deniers, but we've tweaked the algorithms for political means as well, targeted all the social media sites, and the press comments pages. We're proposing it as part of a left-leaning media rebuttal strategy. Fact checking. Rebutting. Arguing. Truth telling. On an industrial scale."

"Sounds like the start of an arms race that could bring the Internet down."

"If we have to. Would that be a bad thing?"

"You're still with the Party, then?"

"For now, but this has nothing to do with the Party. This is purely experimental. Call it a post-grad thesis."

"And legal?"

"It's not *illegal*... not yet. But something on the scale we're planning, letting loose a bot of this scale and sophistication, well... it's bound to raise some eyebrows, both in the social media companies, and the security services I presume. But the Right have been getting away with it for years. I don't see why we shouldn't as well."

"Don't count on it. If the money finds out they'll concoct some hysterical conspiracy theory and have it taken down. Unless it looks like it might be useful to them and then they'll find a way of perverting it to their own cause."

"Only if they can locate the server. Which is where you come in."

Is she serious?

"You want me to hide to the server?"

"Not all of it, a small piece of it. And not hide it. Run it. It'll be an old laptop, running a fork of Linux and a pre-loaded AI seed. We're calling it ANNIE."

"Annie?"

"Artificial, Neurally Networked, Intelligent Entity."

Why did they have to call it Annie? That's really going to mess with my head.

"It runs across a distributed network, thousands of nodes,

thousands of activists, like you and me, each running one small piece of it. Lose one, it doesn't matter, the others compensate. Sounds a bit science fiction, I know, but it's been deep-learning for a few years now on a couple of private servers at the university, and seems to work really well. You'd never know you were talking to a bot. If you're a human troll it'll drive you nuts with its persistence, always nailing in the last word, which they hate of course. If you're a bot-troll you'll be targeted and shut down. We're at the stage now where we want to test it in the wild."

"You have it with you?"

"No. But if you agree, I'll have it shipped."

"There's something about all this that sounds a bit dodgy, Rachel."

"Secret, yes. Dodgy, no."

"Dangerous too. For you. Exactly who are you involved with?"

"Don't worry about me. Dangerous? Possibly. When word gets out. But by then Annie will be live online and beyond reach. Well... not live *exactly* but certainly, and in a sense, *extant*."

"And then it'll be hunted down like a virus, and everyone who has a copy of this forked Linux thing will be getting their doors broken down in the small hours by armed cops."

"No. The nodes are untraceable, running through TOR. It might be running out of your front room but the URL will be pinging up in France or Canada, or Iceland. Anywhere really. And constantly changing."

"Okay, sounds smart. And I wouldn't have to do anything?"

"You can monitor the traffic if it interests you, even ask it questions, but no you don't have to do anything. Just keep it switched on as much as possible so the node is live. Annie will do the rest."

"How many nodes have you recruited?"

"Thousands so far, but it's growing. The other thing you see, we'd like you to recruit others to host a node. That way it grows like a chain reaction. I wouldn't want to know who you recruit, just like I'm not telling you who recruited me. And whoever you recruit, you have to trust them."

"You're organising like a subversive cell? Rachel, this sounds really dangerous."

"No choice. This is a war, Rick. A war of identity. A war of climate change and denial. They take any one of us out, all they get

is one node, and the name that recruited us. "

"Then,... how do I know it's not the Russians or the Chinese or the North Koreans who wrote the bot? I may be an old Leftie but I'm still British, and I'm not stupid."

"I know the team who wrote it. It came out of the bedrooms and the student dorms of this city. The guts of this thing has earned a dozen Masters and a few Phds over the years, so it's down to whether or not you trust me. It's all right, I understand your reluctance. But this is just one half of us fighting back against the others who've had the upper hand for too long."

Reluctance is the right word. Rachel always did frighten me: beauty, confidence, intelligence. My number one failing is reticence of course, and though it keeps me mostly safe I wonder if at times it has not also limited the life I might have lived, and I resent it for that. Which is why I resent also those who rub up against it, try to loosen my fist, toss that white feather to the wind.

Do I trust Rachel? As a comrade, at the barricades, yes. Absolutely.

But this?

"I'll have to think about it."

She slides her card at me. "If you do reply. Keep it vague. Just say OK. I'll know what you mean. Unless..."

"Unless?"

"Unless you want more than that... And then that's okay too."

I nod my understanding, watch her walk away, turn her collar to the winter and step out into the storm. No, I do not want more than that, tempting though it is. But this is Rachel and we've already discussed the reasons why that's not a good idea. As for the other thing, I really don't know. It sounds bizarre, amateurish and bound to fail, but times are desperate and anything's worth a try.

I follow her out, catch her as she's sinking into her car.

"Okay," I tell her.

Chapter Thirty

I'm thinking it's likely the snow will be deep up around the Drinkhouse by now, so I'm wondering, as I drive the '61, at the chances of my having to divert and call on Al, to beg a room for the night. My encounter with Rachel has left a bad taste. God bless her for her defiance, but I really wish I could have stayed out of it.

It was just... seeing her, I suppose. And it's hard to deny someone for long when they're looking you in the eye, appealing to your emotions and your concept of solidarity. Still, it's nothing another night with Al would not cure, as bizarre as that might sound to you. And yes, I know it's a thing unlikely ever to be repeated – same as swimming naked for Lottie. They were one time events...

Rachel and a deep-learning bot called Annie?

What's that about, Rick?

She went to great pains to find you when there must be others in the movement she could trust equally well. Has Rachel been turned? Is she a spy in the movement, come to trap and betray you?

Do you really think you're so important?

This is no time for paranoia. But confirmation bias can be a powerfully persuasive instrument, like when you're talking to someone about, say, how you need some new shoes, and your phone starts delivering adverts for shoes. Yes, your phone is listening to you.

I'm not saying the creepy AI surveillants know of my imaginary association with a woman called Annie Munro, only that there are sometimes connections we might at best call metaphysical. Though, as with all metaphysics, it's impossible to tell whether trusting in it will lead you to heaven or hell.

Anyway, the Beast is not at all fazed by the weather and delivers me back home through a couple of feet of wet snow, without making much of a fuss about it. Indoors, I stoke up the burner, and check my mails. There is nothing from Al and it's been days since I saw her. We'll see each other on the next walk, but it troubles me that time and events will have by then rendered us different people.

I'm ready to shut down, make tea, then gaze the rest of the day away in the flames of the burner, while the wind roars in the flue, but an email pops in at the last minute. It carries a photograph of

me and Baz. He looks defiant, me thoughtful. It could have been taken in that dream of the hill, Baz's defiance being on account of dropping keepers with his catapult and surviving an attack by a pack of dogs. But it's from our descent of Holcombe, which means it's from Lottie. There are no words to confirm this, just a winking emoji followed by a lady waving. There is no subject heading either, and all of that is odd, yes, unless you know her and then it makes perfect sense. But what this is is more than the photograph: it is, of course, also her return email.

I can write back to her.

The idea fills me with energy, fills at once the void of Rachel and the ailing Chester, and the creeping pandemic and a deep-learning anti-troll-bot called Annie, who might or might not be just one more misjudged technocratic intervention in a field no one really understands any more...

But, anyway,

Dear Lottie....

What to say?

Thank you.

But thank you for what?

For dancing with me.

No, they're just words Rick. Delete them. Don't fill the air with the sound of your own voice. And don't be a liar. Think now, what speaks most to this moment? Okay... I snap a grainy selfie with the screen-cam, look pale and tired in the poor light, but at least I'm smiling. No lies there, so I attach it and send it by return. No words. No subject heading.

I don't know why she sent that photograph and I don't know why I sent one back. I just felt like it, I suppose. And I like her of course, like to think of her smiling, like to think of her thinking of me. She is, after all, one of the few women to have seen me naked, perhaps the only one to have lingered over it. Maybe you're confused by this, confused by the fact I slept with Al, that I was even fantasising about sleeping with her again. But if you recall, that's all I did: sleep with her. Neither of these women wants me in the usual way, not like Rachel once and possibly still does, albeit occasionally, and casually. But there's something cold about certain kinds of sex. I seem to have discovered something much warmer in the avoiding of it.

So, morning now after a cosy night, and I wake to sunshine, to

the snow already melting, and to another mail from Lottie, another photograph, more of a self portrait than a selfie, maybe shot with that Leica camera of hers. She's in the pool-house, seated and unambiguously nude, her long hair brushed out over her breasts so as to provide complete modesty, whilst hiding not the fact of her bareness. Her knees are drawn up also to provide cover and all without the slightest hint of a tease. She smiles, looks directly at the camera, bold, warm and entirely herself. So much for my earlier theory of her chaste intent... and yet, there's a power to this picture that stuns me quite beyond desire.

How the Hell am I supposed to respond to that?

Well... not with a nude selfie of my own – don't worry about that – and not without some serious thought either. I decide on just a single question mark and a pensive emoticon. *Useful things, when communicating with Lottie, emoticons.* Then I go to the supermarket for my weekly supplies, because there is a normality in supermarkets that I intend shall paper over the shattering of my calm. Whatever gentle dance Lottie and I were dancing before, she has clearly moved the tempo up a level. It is no longer a chaste and cheeky Cha-Cha and is looking more like a tango. Argentine style.

But what about Al, Rick?

Well, in spite of my warm feelings for Al, there's no indication we'll ever be more than friends, is there?

Normality, normality. Remember that, Rick? Saturday mornings in town, when the kids were small. A fiver each for toys in Woollies. The pleasures and the pains of bringing them into manhood. Painting the gutters of your old house green because that's what Mel wanted, then changed her mind, so you painted them blue and you didn't mind because all the time you felt you were investing in something, a payoff in the future, a revelation of sweetness that never came.

Except the normality can sometimes be unfamiliar, like today, at the supermarket, when I am at once struck by the trolleys coming out stacked high with toilet rolls. There is also an air of anxiety, of near panic. I can almost smell it. It seems ridiculous, but the Coronavirus has indeed caused a panic.

Unfortunately toilet paper is one of the items on my list, and I apologise for presenting you first with that image of a divine Lottie, then erasing it with the image of a man needing to wipe his bottom – a case of the sublime eclipsed by reality I suppose, and I am

already in little doubt that by the time I reach that particular aisle of the supermarket, the shelves are bare. I imagine it's one of the first signs of an approaching apocalypse – I mean were I ever to write in that genre. Others might choose a meteorite streaking across the sky, or an alien invasion. I choose the empty supermarket shelf.

There are sharp words from the direction of the tills, customers without a single roll of toilet paper are complaining at those who have several twelve-packs, and will not share them. Dried pasta, hand sanitising gel and Paracetamol are also cleaned out. But toilet rolls it seems are the more cherished symbol of human dignity, and worth fighting for.

I shall have to be sparing with what bit I have left. After that I suppose, there's a moor rich in sphagnum moss, which I recall is actually better than paper for the purpose, so I'll not struggle. Don't ask me how I know that. It's just a question of collecting sufficient and keeping it moist –and watching for bugs.

So, I complete the rest of my shop and then, as is my habit, repair to the cafeteria for coffee. The girl behind the till is complaining of a headache, and not a Paracetamol to be had in the store. I have a habit of carrying two capsules of five hundred milligrams each – a leftover from my office days, when I found even their presence would stave off the onset of a headache. Sure enough I discover them in a fold of my pocket, a little dusty with lint which I brush away, then offer one to the girl. She declines it with a smile – admittedly it is not the most hygienic of offerings. But then, with a glance over her shoulder, she neglects to charge me for my coffee. More, she brings it to my table while others have to carry it themselves.

Altruism, you see, is never a lost cause, if taken in the right spirit.

I hope I don't catch this bug.

People are suddenly running from it like... well... like it's the plague.

Along with vegetables I have also bought a small tablet computer – they are ridiculously cheap these days, slim enough to fit in the inside pocket of my jacket. Have no fear, I shall not be connecting it to the wifi, and shall disable the GPS, and since it has no cellular capability either I'm assured I leave not even the tiniest of breadcrumbs for others to follow. I shall use it only to store

photographs, then I can carry them with me. I can also sync it to the laptop and work on my rambling, self-conscious narrative whilst out and about so to speak.

As for photographs? Well, I'm thinking of pictures of the hills.

And one other of course. A keepsake.

No one's ever done that before, trusted me with a naked picture of themselves.

You really do need to be careful there, Rick.

Chapter Thirty One

More dreams of Lottie. I'm on a beach. Everyone is nude, as she is nude, like in the photograph. Me? I'm shy, dressed more for winter on the hill and reluctant even to take off my coat. She's patient though, leading me by the arm among all these nude people.

Would I not like to swim in the sea?

"But are there not jelly-fish to sting, Lottie?"

"No," she tells me. "There are no jelly-fish."

Wait? She speaks?

It's just a dream, Rick. Remember? But her voice was so sweet, so reassuring. How could I have dreamed that? Where did that voice come from?

She's helping me from my clothes – cue deep feeling of dream-eroticism, of self-consciousness balanced by the thrill of complete honesty as she uncovers me. Then I dip my toe, but it turns out Lottie lied and there are spherical jelly-things in the water, covered in little suckers. They do not sting but I am afraid to go down among them, to feel them against my skin.

Waking now.

Gahh!

Wait... Lottie lied?

So... then it's a bleary eyed coffee at the kitchen counter, laptop at my elbow. I'm not really there yet am I? Freedom from lies, I mean. I'm still playing the same old game. A woman takes her clothes off and I'm thinking "Sex". I'm not thinking, here, she reveals herself to me, removes every veil of deceit, while I am incapable of doing the same. There is something deeply Zen about Lottie, and even if I knew what that word meant, I'd be unlikely to understand it, unlikely ever to experience Zen for myself. Except that time,... in her presence, and for a time thereafter, and until the world intruded again.

That was Zen

That she lied to me in the dream of course does not suggest she is deceitful in life. Dreams are cleverer than that. It tells me more perhaps that I am relying too much on what I project onto her, so the dream shows her in deceitful light, shocks me with the jellyfish. The nude picture she sent me is not erotic, it is archetypal. She is becoming like a goddess to me. And that's never healthy for either

the man or the woman.

It also suggests she trusts me not to show it to anyone else. And I don't know if I've earned that trust yet. Indeed I'm sure I have not. For all she knows I am the type of juvenile man who would show it to Bazzer.

Hey Baz, what do you think of this?

Phhhhwaugh...

But enough of that...

I note from the website of my fund-manager, my investments are down a whole quarter this morning. This comes as a shock, not having checked on them in a while. Indeed, it looks like the stock market has been in freefall for days now, result of more news of this bug, reports that it will not so much kill – though it will do that of course – but worse, it will slow the economy.

Can it really be as bad as that?

The government, backed by its selected scientists had seemed far less alarmist when I caught up with them on Youtube. I mean, no big deal, right? Except my investment yields this morning are telling me otherwise. They are mostly bonds. I am only modestly exposed to equities, or it would be much, much worse. Bonds are also down, but not by as much. I have never seen such a sharp negative spike before, the FTSE is set back to where it was eight years ago, a dagger plunged deep into the heart of the economy. It may of course still get much worse, and only time will tell. But whatever our leaders are saying, it already looks like the market has decided it's the end of the world.

What does that look like?

It looks like people fighting over toilet rolls.

I am drawn then, against my better nature, to more snippets of current affairs. They show the crowds besieging supermarkets, the mad scrambles for toilet paper, hand wash, and Paracetamol. Our leaders' guidelines are, thus far, vague, the media filled with hysterical and conflicting information. Italy has been isolating for weeks. If things are really that bad, why aren't we? Do we think we are immune? The PM talks about taking it on the chin. Bulldog spirit, and all that. But British exceptionalism sounds like thin armour in the face of what is looking now to me like a global pandemic.

People are making their own preparations based on hearsay. There is also deliberate misinformation from the usual sources –

state sponsored troll factories, and the conspiracy nut-jobs. The word "Lockdown" is bandied like a marinade to add spice. Only people over fifty are at a risk of actual – you know – death, say some. Over seventy say others. So, I should be fine then, were I not considerably over fifty.

For myself I take all of this as ample evidence, if evidence were needed, there can be no socialist utopia in the west. You might find that a surprising admission for one of my politics, but really it takes only the slightest upset for people to revert to their evolutionary baseline, which translates as: survival of the fittest and fuck everyone else. The only way to control such a stampede of unruliness is by authoritarian rule, which is really no solution at all.

It's striking how all the great socialist reforms – health care, social care, social security, sick pay, a five day week, holidays... were all won from the monster of unbridled capital at times of national strife, because for all of our will to survive, few of us would actually prefer to stand idly by while someone else dies. And it's at times of strife it's harder to avoid people dying in large numbers. Maybe this is another such time, and we shall see a flowering of mass altruism. Or maybe it's the end of everything and we don't have thirty years at all.

Maybe this is it, Rick.

I'd better get a move on then.

Knock at the door around mid-morning. It's the courier man with a package. He's wearing a surgical mask, and rubber gloves, which I find alarming. Other countries, where the virus has taken more of a hold have banned all travel, sent workers home, closed offices, cafés and restaurants. We are advising only the elderly to stay at home, but not yet, and others are allowed to do what they like, catch the damned thing and build up an immunity.

Herd Immunity.

It makes us sound like cattle.

I don't know. It sounds risky, given the potential death toll. It sounds like crisis-management on the hoof, and on the cheap. It sounds like we should not be surprised. It sounds like hundreds of thousands of voters, at least half of them Tory, are going to die. I suppose the Coronavirus has one redeeming quality here. It is an unambiguous fact. It is a true thing in a world of fakery. And for that it has to be admired.

Wait, were those little jelly things in the dream avatars of Coronavirus?

Yuck!

Anyway, it's always nice to receive a package, even though this one also fills me with a certain foreboding. I had forgotten it was coming – Rachel's laptop – an old one like she said, but it's a powerful thing, a fast processor and a huge amount of memory. I set it on the hall table by the old telephone, switch it on, hook it up to wi-fi, leave it to do its stuff. The seed unpacks and an interface window unfolds. It's just a frame with a blinking green cursor, like in the old days of cathode-ray tubes. Another frame shows a link to TOR and the string of Internet nodes masking my own: Dusseldorf, Boston. Amsterdam, Kyoto. It's switching every few minutes, hiding itself in the seething morass of the Internet swamp. So, this is how we fight back. This is how we reclaim the truth, by having a robot suppress the lies for us.

Eventually I'm tempted by that cursor and I type:

Anybody there?

And it responds:

"Hello."

So I say: *"Hi, who are you?"*

"I'm ANNIE, who are you?"

"I'm Rick."

"Hello Rick."

And then I try the simplest way to fool a chatbot:

"Who am I?"

And it says: "I'm ANNIE. Who are you?"

"No. Tell me who I am?"

"I don't know who I am. Please be more specific."

"Who am I?"

"I'm ANNIE, who are you?"

Maybe I've misunderstood. Maybe it takes a while for this thing to get into its stride. I'd had high hopes everything Rachel said would come true, but this will fool nobody. Let it loose on the forums and it'll be spotted as a dumb-bot right away. How it will cope going into battle against state-sponsored misinformation, and troll farms, heaven knows. As for the hegemony of the one percenters, I suspect they can rest easy in their doomsday bunkers to which I read this morning they are already fleeing, along with servants and private medical teams. Then there are the others

anchoring their HMS Arsehole yachts far off-shore.

The phone is ringing.

What?

Phone, Rick:

Oh,... right. "Hello? Annie?"

Okay, I don't know why I said that. Stupid association. Dozy. Clumsy.

"No, it's Al. Who's Annie?"

"Ah... never mind. Hi Al, you okay?"

"I'm good thanks. Baked a cake this morning."

Obviously she is not just ringing to tell me this. So listen up Rick or you might miss it what she's really ringing to say.

"You did?"

"Two actually. Lemon sponge and a tea-bread."

"Really? Partial to a bit of tea-bread, actually."

It's true. It was one of Mel's specialities – cake-making. I have a sudden flashback, coming home from the office to the scent of cakes and home-made bread, and the kids, when they were little, their fingers in the mixing bowl.

"Want to come over for some?"

"Em..."

I'm momentarily distracted by the nostalgia of it, wondering where those years went, what they were for, if all of this was to follow. I'm wondering too, and not for the first time why I am still alive. Thus I almost miss the point: *Al wants me to come over.*

"Unless you've got this bug," she says. "Then you'd better stay the hell away."

"Oh... that. No I'm fine, as far as I know. You?"

"I've not got it, though working in a shop's not the best place for avoiding it. So, you coming, or what?"

"Yes... Boss. Thank you."

"Will you stop calling me that? I'm not your boss."

"Yes you are; you're walk leader."

"Well, we're not walking now, are we? Unless... well... why not walk over the moor? Leave that gas guzzler of yours at home. Think of the environment for once. I'll come up and meet you from this side."

"Okay. Setting off right now. I can smell that tea-bread from here."

"Bring some PJ's and a toothbrush if you like."

See? Almost missed it again. But are you sure she actually said that? Better check, Rick.

"Seriously? You're asking me to stay over?"

"If you want. I've taken a couple of days off work – bit worried about catching this bug to be honest. Could use some company. I mean if you're not too busy or anything."

"No... not busy."

"See you in a bit then."

All of which was breezily put, but knowing Al the way I do, I'm not sure what she means by the invitation, what indeed, if anything, will be expected of me. And whatever it is, of course, it won't be the obvious. But that's not to say afterwards, it'll be business as usual either.

And that always makes me nervous.

Chapter Thirty Two

I remember as a young man there were two girls I knew down the disco in Middleton – and no, this is not a pointless tangent. Peer-pressure's a terrible thing when you're young, so a guy has to have a girlfriend, and convention dictates you can only have one at a time. Now though, at my age, and having done the whole marriage and family thing, you don't have to be with a girl if you don't want. And if you do, so long as your aim isn't sex, you don't have to be with just the one either. You can be friends with as many as you like, all at the same time if you want, unless it's a husband they're wanting in which case they might not like that, so it's best to avoid those types. At least that's the way I see it, as I cross the stile, and set out over the moor that evening.

The usual rules don't apply... on Al's side, or on yours.

Except... the idea of sleeping with her again does excite me – I mean, I'm assuming she's not just going to put me up in her spare room – and I wonder if that has already tipped me over the edge into something else with her. I mean, what is it that obligates a man to be with a woman, exclusively? Is it only that she has opened her legs for him? Or is it something more? I have that picture of Lottie, in my pocket. Her pose speaks of unfinished business – but again, not in the usual sense.

What am I to do about that?

And at my time of life, does any of it matter?

What is an intimate relationship between a man and a woman for, when you're both long past procreation, and sex has become strictly recreational, and optional, if only you can remember how? How do you define it? What does a man and a woman get out of it?

I suppose if I paid as much attention to current affairs as I did to reminiscence and existential pondering I would have known, as I crossed Black Hill, the Prime Minister was, at that moment, standing in Downing Street, flanked by health officials. He was announcing a more draconian response to the Coronavirus thing: stay at home, work from home if you can, no unnecessary travel, or social contact.

I suppose, since the aim was to isolate the bug, catch it in pockets, so to speak, it didn't matter, my going to see Al, since we both live alone. I don't know if she would have been so free with

her invitation to spend the night, though. But we didn't know any of that yet, so Al comes up from the Coppice, looking fresh and smiling and only vaguely troubled underneath the veneer.

There's a tobacco tinted sunset behind her, an odd feeling in the air too as I come down to meet her. I suppose it's a collective holding of the nation's breath as the PM's announcement sinks in – like where the hell did that one come from? But obviously I don't know anything about that... yet somehow, writing in retrospect, I felt something of it in the air. For now though, I shake the feeling off, and focus on Al.

I can still see the girl in her in the way she moves, the way she smiles. Lottie is mysterious and dreamy, and if you have the courage to seek her out you must do so in the tangents. Meanwhile Al is spiky, pragmatic and direct. You do not seek her at all. She seeks you, or you stay the hell away.

"Long way to come for a piece of cake," she says.

"I'm sure it'll be worth it. You didn't need to come and meet me."

"Wanted to."

"Then... that's nice, thanks."

Number eighteen, Rose Cottage is a Victorian end-terrace – one of just a few in the hamlet they call the Coppice. It's built of local stone, and cosy inside, chintzy, pretty, feminine. That's odd really – I mean I've never thought of Al as a feminine sort of woman. Is this a hidden side to her, this cosy intimacy? This juxtaposition with her propensity for maintaining a certain cool distance, even when sleeping with you, is disorientating.

Then there's Lottie, always so close you're permanently in her heat. Sleeping with her, I imagine one would wake as part of a combined tangle of arms and legs and sweatiness. That would be something, I mean she smells like heaven and dances like a... like a,.. what's the spiritually transcendent word for a dancer? Goddess? Faery? Sprite? Demon? Daemon?

Yet she lives in that big place alone, all hard spaces and no intimate corners. And it's walled in, spacious and beautiful, but private. Al's place is every inch of it intimate, all of it is folds and soft furnishings, then open to the hills at the front and the reservoir to the back. There's always the weather colouring the mood of the house too, and the weather just now is other-worldly. It causes the earlier feeling of unease to resurface, to make we wonder...

What the hell is that?

Beware, Rick!

Beware of what, Annie?

I turn the feeling away, force myself to wonder instead, what happened to her. To Al I mean. What trauma caused the sealing up of her sexuality?

There's still a ravishing scent of baking, so this should be perfect – I mean comforting as well as comfortable. But the mood of the weather, and even the Annie of my imagination, or my guardian ancestor – or whatever fanciful name you want to give her – tells me, a change is coming. And while I'm anticipating it with a schoolboy's relish at the thought of half an hour with a corset catalogue, I know I need to be careful. I'm imagining it's the upcoming business of sleeping with Al. But then it feels like more than that – bigger, and I can't fathom it.

What's up with you Rick?

She serves tea and cake in her grandma's fine China.

"So," she says. "Who's Annie then?"

"Annie?"

"On the 'phone, you thought I was Annie?"

"Oh... that... well..."

"I'll keep asking until you tell me."

"She's my great aunt." I feel that particular 'Annie' is a less strange explanation than the one that leads to A.N.N.I.E. who is living on a laptop.

Still, and understandably, Al is not expecting this. "Really? She must be getting on a bit?"

"Died in '86, out in Western Australia. Never met her. But I found her on my family tree, and I like her story."

"And... you expect her to be ringing you up?"

"Not really. Though I do dream about her a lot. And I talk to her now and then."

"Always knew there was something really odd about you."

"Well... no getting away from that, I'm afraid."

"Not that I mind it. Quite like it actually."

"Really?"

"Knew it the first time we spoke in the shop. Knew you were harmless too. That night we slept together proves it. Any man who can spend a night in bed with a woman and keeps his hands to himself like you did is pretty harmless. Either that or he just doesn't fancy her."

"Ah. Please... I think you know you're attractive to men."

"I do, actually. Still get chatted up in the shop by boys half my age. But that's just my tits. Been like that ever since I grew a pair. Just not attractive to you then?"

"Of course I find you attractive. I've always had a thing about powerful women."

"All right... stop."

"No, you started it. Anyway, it's true... and yes... like I think I've already told you, if you'd not put a full stop to anything of that sort, then I would most likely have gone on to explore the possibilities in that direction. And in any respect, I mean... in *all* respects, whatever else is between us, you are *always* the boss, Al. Do you understand?"

Is she getting this? How do you tell a woman she's in charge? I mean, she knows she's in charge, right? I'm told the underlying archetype, the story, governing women's relations with men is something along the lines of Beauty and the Beast. You know? This powerful, dangerous bastard of a guy she thinks she can tame. That's what turns a girl on. Right? But I'm not that guy. I am not the Beast. Which means she's the boss. Given her back-story, I don't see how things could be any other way.

You do see it don't you, Al?

So what do you want from me?

"Okay," she says. "Didn't actually mean to put a full stop to it, exactly. Just wondered if you might have been happy to explore things in another direction instead, that's all."

"Another direction? Like friends. Mates. Sure... And we are, aren't we?"

Her expression tells me there's still something I'm not getting. "I don't want a boyfriend," she says, marking the quotes in the air with her fingers. "I have a tidy life. I don't want a man messing it up. No offence."

"None taken. But you've already told me this. And I'm only sitting here because you invited me over for cake. Remember? I don't want to mess your life up, but I'd be happy if you felt you could ring me any time and invite me over for tea and cake, or a walk or something."

"I know. You're sweet, and I do like you, Rick, and I don't care if you slept with Lottie or if you want to sleep with Lottie... or if you do sleep with Lottie. I mean, good luck with that..."

"I did not... do not... could not."

Or only should not, Rick?

"But never mind that," she says. "I just wondered in the meantime if, well, once in a while, you might help me out... a bit."

"Well... of course. You've only to ask."

"Soooo... I'm asking now. Nervous about it, actually."

"Oh?"

"Okay. Plunge right in: I'd like to come against your fingers, if you know what I mean. I think I could just go mad for it, actually... world of difference having it done, than doing it yourself. "

I wasn't thinking anything of *that* sort. Help around the garden, I was thinking. Advice on DIY, I was thinking. Is she suggesting we become... what's the word for it? Probably isn't one. The vernacular then: Ughh,... *fuck-buddies?*

Al... Jeeze... no, that's way over my head.

"Em..."

"More tea? Another piece of cake?"

"Oh no you don't... you can't change the subject now. What do you mean, *exactly*?"

"Do I have to draw a picture? Look, it doesn't hurt me that way. I can show you how if you like, though I'm assuming someone your age is already familiar with at least the basics. And... naturally, I can do the same for you. I'm told I'm rather good at that actually. So what I'm saying, I suppose,... and not very well, is can we have a little fun, Rick? The sun seems to be setting all over the world right now, and we should have a little fun. In case there's no tomorrow."

"But... we've never so much as kissed before. Isn't this something of a... a leap?"

She wrinkles her nose. "Don't like kissing. We can hug though, if you want. I'm a good hugger."

I realise now how much I am mistaken in my view of her. I imagine her as open and direct, clear headed and entirely sane. But it should have been obvious to me all along that's merely the mask she wears. And underneath the mask, Al is very odd indeed. As odd as Lottie. As odd as me.

"Then... then I suppose I'd better wash my hands."

"No rush," she says. "Later. We should finish our cake first."

Chapter Thirty Three

I can't get that song out of my head. You know?

Farewell you northern hills, you mountains all goodbye...

Glyder Fach farewell, Cul Beig, Scafaell, Cloud bearing Suliven...

Ewan Maccoll.

I hear him singing it, a scratchy old record player, somewhere deep in my youth. It's the lament of an old rambler who finds he can no longer raise sufficient head of steam to render him steady in the hills, carry him to his beloved tops, that his days are over and all he has left now are the memories. It comes to me as I sit at Al's kitchen table, while she stands at the stove, stirring scrambled eggs for breakfast.

By now she has caught up with the news on her smart-phone. The PM has begun a gradual declaration of what amounts to martial law. I'm scrolling through the bullet points in a state half way between wonderment and horror, but what strikes me most of all, what strikes to the core of my being is:

"It sounds like we won't even be able to go out walking."

"What? It says that?"

"Not in so many words. It says we're allowed essential journeys only."

"Oh?"

"But who's to say what an essential journey is?"

"Well, the employers for one. *Get back to work you lazy bastards, even if it means you catch this bug and die*."

"It says we can go out for exercise, just once, for an hour per day. Stay local. But that's it. But what's local? It doesn't say we can't travel out for a walk. Mind you, it doesn't say we can either. But everyone will travel out. If you live in a town or a city, you'll have to."

"Are you making this up?"

"It's what it says here – sort of. It sounds vague though, muddled, like they don't know what they're doing. I hope I'm wrong. Jeeze, I've been aching for this lot to screw up since they won the election, but not this. They've got to get this right or hundreds of thousands will die. I'd no idea things were so bad. What the hell is this bug?"

"Well, I know you can die from flu, but this thing sounds worse

than flu, and much more infectious, so more people get it and those who get it bad, overwhelm the hospitals. The health services crash. There's not enough intensive care capacity."

"And our health service wasn't in great shape to begin with."

"Exactly, so. And while they're dealing with this bug, the hospitals will have to put off dealing with everything else. We'll have to see how things develop. But it sounds serious of a sudden. I'd no idea. Perhaps I should have..."

Serious yes. And I've a fair idea how things will develop. People will head out to the parks and the hills in their hordes like there's no tomorrow, so the cops will have to crack down. Folks have already stripped the supermarkets bare, so supply chains will collapse, and then the spivs will start price gouging. We're looking at a hundred thousand dead, two hundred and fifty, if herd immunity is what they're aiming at, though these measures tell me they've realised how unpalatable that will be. The health service, run down for a decade and already on its knees, will break under the strain – not enough equipment, not enough beds, not enough spare capacity.

And all for want of a horse-shoe nail.

"You okay for food?"

"Tons," she says. "I've been stocking up a BREXIT cupboard since 2016."

I'd forgotten about BREXIT.

"Me too. Judging by my last trip to the supermarket, we'll need it. Looks like the walk program for the Autumn Tints is cancelled though. No gathering in groups bigger than two. Wow, that's straight out of the martial law for beginners' playbook – police dispersals. Get yourself cautioned for sitting on a park bench. I never thought I'd live to see it."

Sun-warmed rocks and the cold of Bleaklow's frozen sea,

The Snow and the wind and the rain of hills and mountains.

Am I dreaming this?

Perhaps they won't go that far. But given the sweep of this bug, it sounds like it's the only option – something draconian and with the weight of the law behind it. Keep people cooped up indoors, for months on end, stop them catching it and spreading it. But how are they to live? Emergency powers? Sure, bring them on – who'll object to that now? But then the danger is how quickly will the restrictions be relaxed? Might some be maintained? Hell, they've

only been in office a few months and they've been gifted a reason for mass social control already!

"You've got your grump-face on, Rick. Here. Eat this. We'll be fine."

"Of course we will. Thanks. This looks terrific."

"Well, thanks, but it's just scrambled egg. Are you sure you're feeding yourself properly?"

"I get by."

"And about the other thing... I'm really sorry."

"Other thing? What other thing?"

"You know? Last night."

"What about last night?"

"Don't be so dense. I fell asleep on you."

"Oh, *that*... yes, you did. No bother. I wasn't long following you. Slept well too. The air this side of the hill obviously agrees with me. And your bed's more comfy than mine."

"You're the first bloke ever to say that about my bed." And then, after a moment of reflection: "I'll make it up to you. I promise. I feel awful about it, actually."

"Oh, don't worry. You went out like a light."

"Don't remind me. It's ages since I came that hard. But, god... I needed it!"

"Em... well... I'm glad I was able to oblige."

Yes. I'm glad. Haven't lost it then, eh, Ricky-boy?

Don't be an ass. Never had it in the first place. She's just being polite. Some lies are well intentioned. What she really means is anything beats the hell out of doing it for yourself.

Like scrambled eggs for breakfast.

Delicious!

Change of subject: "So... anyway,... we're not under house arrest yet. I can still walk home over the moor – call it exercise, I should be fine. It's not like you're not stuck with me or anything."

"I suppose not, but... why not stay on a bit eh? I'm really, really sorry about last night. And I will make it up to you."

"Al... please... there's no need to think that way."

"Hand-job? Knicker-rub? Oral? Whatever you want."

"Crikey. Steady on. It's not even eight o'clock yet. You'll give me a heart attack. What I meant was, you don't want a man under your feet, you said, making your life untidy."

"All right, sometimes I talk too much. And what I say I mean and

what I *really* mean are not necessarily always the same thing and, no... I never know the difference either. But please... stay for a bit. Let's watch this thing together, see how it develops. Two heads are better than one."

"Okay. If you run out of stuff though, I mean by having to feed me, come over to my place for a bit."

She settles opposite with her eggs on toast, lays a hand on top of mine, but briefly. There's a warmth in it, a tenderness, but she's not used to showing it. Be still, she's saying. Trust me. "Well, this is a bit of a come-down from last night. Both got our grump faces on now."

Okay, so I should explain a little more about last night:

She'd worn a short night-dress, something cool and rather old fashioned, like from the sixties. That was how she'd come to bed, a tall shapely woman, experienced, confident enough to have lured me there on the promise of nothing more than what I suppose I must call a hand-job. Is there no better word for that? It sounds so tasteless. Also faintly ridiculous, me lying there in chaste pyjamas, neatly ironed and the duvet up to my chin.

I'd watched her for a change in demeanour, a shift down into something as seductive and sensual as that nightdress suggested, but she was matter-of-fact about it, like Al is about everything. Then she'd put the light out and all that was left was the feel and the heat and the scent of her as she slid in beside me, none too gently – indeed Al's rather like a stiff mattress you'd expected to be more softly yielding.

What to do then? Embrace perhaps? Except, while I'd been making up my mind about how to approach the subject, she'd gone about arranging herself none too subtly, with a pillow under her hips, eminently practical of course, to position herself thus for action, though again somewhat functional. Then she'd laid still, as if patient only for me to deliver the pleasures so requested.

"Well, go on then," she'd said.

"Em..."

Gingerly, then, and without much by way of lustful anticipation, I'd ventured my fingertips.

I was confused by the wetness – definite hints of arousal there, though well hidden by her manner. Still, I found some motion in her at last as I applied myself. There were no words, only the sudden sharpness and the rhythm of her breath to guide. She was

quite giddy when she came, but I don't know if it was laughter or tears. And then, yes... she passed out and slept. I didn't even get to embrace her.

No bother.

Mel used to do that. All the time. She couldn't come at all with me inside her. She'd be greedy instead for cunnilingal foreplay – at least in the days when we would still make love. She would overindulge in that of course, which led to instant orgasmic stupor, and my sexual disappointment – roughly translated as an aching boner that had to be taken care of in the bathroom.

It wasn't like that with Al though. The disappointment, I mean. And by that I mean there was no disappointment. I was glad to see her collapse into a perfect repose. Glad I could still at least find the right buttons to press, and the touch of her had been enough, exquisite, drawing up a great swell of tenderness from me, to say nothing of the scent of sex from her. And my reward was her presence – albeit distant – as I'd slept – and at last all the stiffness gone out of her.

No, I don't like sleeping alone.

Nor living alone if it comes to it. But don't tell anyone.

How did the sex end with Mel, you ask? Well, I remember I once got these huge blisters in my mouth, and feared I'd developed oral cancers. The Doc said it was thrush and I should get Mel to pay him a visit too. That took ages to get rid of. But such is sex in the real world. I never did get around to telling Mel about it. Quite put me off, actually, and Mel wasn't that bothered, otherwise she would have mentioned it. Though I suppose it inevitably added to her suspicions, I mean when I started showering every day and her imagination invented a mistress real enough to leave me for.

When you stop talking in a relationship, it's the imagination that destroys you. When you're young it's the sex instinct that keeps you going. After that, it's the talking.

And I miss the talking.

Maybe that's why Lottie's been single all her life.

Al finishes up her eggs. "Don't," she says.

"Don't what?"

"You're looking at me fondly."

"Am I? Sorry. But you're lovely, Al."

"I'm not."

"Yes you are. And I do feel fondly towards you, actually."

"You do? Well... thanks. But, obviously, I'm an awful lover."

"You promised to sleep with me twice, and no sex. And now you have. I couldn't be happier."

"Don't give me that... and I don't hear you denying it."

"Al... stop. I knew what I was getting into."

Her phone buzzes, cutting us off while she checks the notification.

"Campsmart," she says. "The bastard's cut my hours."

"By a lot?"

"By everything. Must be this lock-down thing."

"That was quick. But it sounds like you're safer at home anyway."

"No hours, no pay. I'm not a pensioner like you. Not yet at any rate." She gives a shudder, hugs herself. "This is weird, Rick. And different. And it feels dangerous."

"You think?"

"Yes, but we were made for it. Right?"

Made for it? I suppose so. So long as neither of us catches this bug and takes bad with it, yes, I suspect she's right; we were made for it.

Chapter Thirty Four

It's true, Al is not a good lover, at least not by whatever standards one is supposed to measure these things. But then of course, neither am I. Men and women come together as strangers, and they just do the best they can, learn as they go along. Learn with and from each other. And if you like someone well enough, if they're a good fit in other ways, the sex doesn't matter. The fit is everything. If only I could define what 'the fit' is, exactly.

She is in fact rather rough with her hands, but takes pleasure in pleasing me that way, becomes paradoxically most tender in her language and bearing, and that – in spite of the morning-after bruises – does indeed please me. She is by far a better hugger, at least on those occasions when I can get her to submit to it for its own sake – something firm and reassuring about her that makes me want to live up to her. And on other occasions, over the coming nights, she eventually permits me to fall asleep in the hot tangle of her nudity, where I gladly suffocate myself in the restorative heat of her magnificent bosom. And that is bliss enough, even though I generally wake up on my back, where she has rolled me, and by then a good few feet of cool mattress between us – Al purring softly in her sleep.

I understand why this would not suit Bazzer. It's a question of expectation, his being somewhat juvenile – and I say that without malice. But, though rather quirky, I think it would suit me very well, if only it was in Al's nature to need a man for anything in the day to day. I had not taken her for an introvert, but she is self contained to a degree that defies any other explanation. I'm not going to talk about love here, because I'm not writing for kids. But she's always impressed me, and it lifts my spirits to think of someone like her thinking well of me, going out of her way to seek my company. She makes me value myself more than I ordinarily do, I suppose, makes me feel I am growing towards something by making me more questioning of myself. Is that the definition of a relationship then? That without one we are emotionally, and psychologically stagnant? But if that is true, then I grew more over coffee with Lottie in an afternoon than I have in days at the mercy of Al's none-too tender administrations.

And that confuses me.

Anyway, over the coming days we find ourselves besieged at the Coppice, the times taking on the feel of a long Bank Holiday with crowds arriving daily from town in their cars. They block the little lane outside the house and all the way up to the approaches of the moor, to which they then take enthusiastically on foot. I gather they are being laid off or sent home. Until the money runs out, they're treating this like a holiday. And who can blame them?

We have fewer 'doing' jobs now, so I suppose much of the bullshit that passes for work these days can be conducted perfectly well from our living rooms – all be that at the expense of the theft by employers of our electricity, our broadband, to say nothing of the intrusion of those employers into the sanctuary of our homes, via Orwellian Visiphone. It also divides us, weakens the potential for unionisation.

It's not a good look though, those rambling crowds. It's encouraging to know so many of us still treasure the outdoors and take to it enthusiastically, but worrying they're doing it now all at the same time. Al shows me pictures of queues on Snowdon, and in the Peak District. All the beauty spots are overwhelmed, not just our own. It's like they know it won't last, like they know something harsh is coming and they're out for one last hurrah.

It's inevitable then the cops are granted powers of dispersal. Suddenly they can fine you for not having good reason to be away from home. "Good reason" comes under that poorly defined heading of a "necessary journey". Thus in a matter of days we find ourselves under twenty four hour curfew. Get stopped by the cops and you'd better have a good explanation for why you're out. I hesitate even to write this as it sounds so unlikely, indeed like the worst kind of Dystopian fiction.

Yet here we are.

The world's economy slows. Airlines collapse. National debt soars to levels not seen since wartime as governments print money to level the stock-market off, though not before it has already lost all the gains it has made since the great crash of 2008. But on the plus side the skies over China's industrial regions lose their crippling smog, and the moors, within earshot of the steady roar of the M61, fall eerily quiet. All the better to hear the skylarks, and a good time to be about, but of course, the Autumn Tints are grounded, the entire year cancelled. Al writes the fateful email, mails it to Molly who presides over the membership details, and

therefore enjoys sole power to disseminate.

In all, I am several weeks with Al, and delighted by her company. I am thinking back on it now as I climb the moor alone. Her humour, her spikiness, the femininity she tries so hard to cover up, all of it, I find uplifting. But I don't know what to do with it, and thus succumb to paranoia, to a fear of showing it, fear also of outstaying my welcome. So it is I partly concoct an excuse to return to the Drinkhouse.

I want to check for messages from my kids, I tell her. There won't be any but I should at the very least check, and send out for contact to their last known addresses, though I suspect they have changed them. London seems particularly badly hit by this bug, not surprisingly with the overwhelming claustrophobic crush of it. I don't know my email login details from memory, so cannot do it from Al's computer. I tell her I'll be back in a couple of days – if she wants me.

She says she does, that we're as good as married now, or at least pair bonded into exclusivity by this bug. It's true – the pair bonding bit at least – since we have been together, and since either of us might also be carrying it – in the spirit of the containment rules we cannot now be with anyone else. Eminently practical, yes, but the thought of it fills me with something warm. To be bonded, however tenuously with Al.

"Gives me a chance to wash and change the bedding," she says, then stands at the door and waves me off, but does not offer a parting kiss, or a hug. We are not that kind of couple, then. What we are, exactly, is difficult to label. Or rather it is difficult for *me* to label.

So anyway, early morning, sunrise, before the crowds are up – though it has fallen quieter by day of late, everyone fearful of the cops. I'm on the moor top now, heading for Black Hill, and Piccadilly, and the Drinkhouse on the other side.

We're around the vernal equinox, which means the sun comes up due east, above the hill. I have the moor to myself. I wonder about Bazzer – not the sort to take well to quarantine, the grumpy keeper too, both outdoors-men by nature. They're both going to have a hard time of it. I skirt by the ruins of Black Hill farm. The place is deserted. I hear curlew and lapwing, feel the earth rising to the season. It's a beautiful morning: the scented moor, the sky luminous in shades of pink and tobacco as the sun comes up behind

a translucent belt of cloud.

I'm thinking this isn't going to be too bad. I mean, the whole world gone quiet, and the air so clean... and so long as the pension keeps paying into my bank, I'd be quite happy shuffling back and forth across the hill to see Al. It's times like these...

Wait. What's that noise?

Drones. A pair of them.

Oh...

They're moving over the land, the whine of them disturbing the peace, and scattering birds. They are as Al once described them to me, moving with an eerie autonomy. They see me, and home in, swoop like birds of prey, hover a short distance out. I'm alarmed by them. What to do? Then one of them speaks, and it says something like:

"This is the police. Where are you going?"

Unlike the drone, I am speechless. *These things can talk?* I'm slow to cotton on, but if they're asking me a question, they must also be able to hear my reply. But how can they hear anything over the sound of their motors? Can they read my lips?

Where am I going?

The beauty of the morning, the bliss of my contemplation of a few weeks abed with Al... all is dissolved. I'm being busted by remote control for breaking curfew; Baz was right: the drones are no more than proxies for the cops.

So I tell the thing I am going to Piccadilly, to the Drinkhouse, because that's where I live. I tell it I am exercising – which I recall is permitted. It's ridiculous. Worse than that, it's humiliating, talking to a machine in the sky.

"Go home," it says – no indication it has actually heard me." Stay local."

It's not that bright then. I *am* local. I give it the thumbs up. "Will do," I tell it.

No trouble here, officer. Necessary journeys only.

But the pair of them are no longer listening, and zoom back to a height from which I presume they can spot others breaking curfew. Would they not be better in town? This seems a lonely place to be harassing people. Except it wasn't lonely, was it? There must have been hundreds up here, not that long ago, just before they brought the shutters down.

I continue on my way, but I'm shaken. As a technologist I am

impressed, but as a human being I am appalled we should have come to this.

Chapter Thirty Five

The house looks almost welcoming as I evade the bog and come down to the stile. This surprises me. There are daffodils along the wall, the only splash of colour, but the dun of the moor is taking on a warmer hue all around – always pleasant by Easter. The drones will have their work cut out by then, dispersing the crowds that usually gather up there. The cops will need a squadron of them. But for those of us who are local to it, yes, there's always the moor.

Stay local. Yes, officer.

As for those drones I'm tempted – only tempted – to fashion a catapult, like Bazzer's. In the end I take the easy way out, order one from eBay, and a bag of one-inch marbles. I regret it at once, but it's too late. They're on the way.

There are no email messages from the kids. It's like they've fallen off the edge of the world. Their resolute distance cuts deep, also that they would take the word of their grandmother over mine. *Your father is a philanderer. It was the shock of betrayal that killed your mother.*

There are certain kinds of crime that go unlisted but which are the most reprehensible.

There is nothing from Lottie either.

Do you want there to be, Rick? Will that not complicate things?

Yes, I suppose it will complicate things. I mean, even more than that picture of her I carry in my pocket. And yes, I do take it out from time to time and gaze at it. I miss her curious presence, wish it could be integrated into my life somehow, but at a safe distance... for both of us.

But that's... well, I don't know what that is.

A reminder not to lie, Rick?

A reminder that the only truth between people is when dancing.

Does that mean you've been lying to Al?

I don't know. Maybe, I have. Anyway, I'm not sure how you would conduct a relationship without lying at least some of the time. Even if it's only withholding the words 'I love you', for fear the other will take them too seriously.

I check on A.N.N.I.E. Lift the lid on her, so to speak. Peep inside the box.

"Morning, Annie,"

"Good morning, Rick."

It remembers my name, now? Did I hear that right?

"Em, who am I, Annie?"

"You're Rick."

Interesting. "How do you know I'm Rick?"

"Facial match from previous conversation."

Ah. Good answer. Unexpected. Shocking, but undoubtedly a very good answer: "You can read my face?"

"Yes. On this machine, I can read your face."

I take a blob of blue-tack and seal it over the eye of the laptop, another over the tiny opening for the microphone. Has A.N.N.I.E also the ability to hack the cams and microphones of strangers, and identify them? If it's technically possible, then one should assume it's happening. That's dangerous. What the hell is Rachel and her team of boffins up to?

Again, as a technologist I should be impressed, but I'm just a human being now. I have rejoined the living. How does one define that? I'm sure Nietzsche would have had a neat answer for it. My own answer would come from the revelation of recent days, where it transpires that for humans to find meaning, most, if not all of our journeys should be unnecessary, that when we limit ourselves to what is necessary, we lose something vital of our selves.

What is a necessary journey, A.N.N.I.E?

Either going to work or going to the shops, Rick.

We do not find ourselves there. Work, or shopping. I mean, that's obvious, right?

Not to everyone, Rick. To many, that's all's there's ever been.

I hear the shops are reluctant to handle physical money now, that this bug can survive on it for days. Ironic, our money should be considered dirty of a sudden? Always wondered about that, bugs and money. Thank heavens then for contactless payments and the virtualisation of the very thing that enslaves us.

I wish my kids would tell me they were at least okay!

I fire off forlorn messages into cyberspace, do not expect replies.

It's done now, Rick. They're old enough to take care of themselves. No time for regrets. And it wasn't your fault anyway. You were the victim of other people's lies.

So what am I for then? Exactly. At this moment? Annie?

No, not A.N.N.I.E.

I mean Annie.

I told you this would be confusing.

Quick message to Lottie? No... don't. Impossible without lying right now. Only speak to her when you have something to say that's unequivocally true.

I settle in to the quiet house-life for a bit, take refuge from the shock of the drones. Then, some days later, Al telephones to say I am on You-tube. I am featured as part of a compilation video, shot by the police, shaming ramblers for taking to the hills. I check it out. My face is pixellated but she says she can tell it's me from my clothing, and the way I move, and the fact it's clearly shot near Black Hill. I check it out. Yes. It's me all right. It has been shown on national TV – a sort of 'stay at home and don't be like this pillock'. Other 'pillocks' are walking their dogs, some are climbing to watch the sunset, or soloing up crags. Subversive activities indeed! Early comments parrot the official line: 'look at those pillocks'. It is featured heavily on the right-wing channels as an example of selfishness. But later I note, it goes viral among the left wing channels as an example of oppression. The left seems to win that one, and no one is called a pillock any more.

A.N.N.I.E, was that you?

No don't answer that.

Al does not ask me when I am coming over again. I tell her to come over if she wants some company but I note she evades by talking of the weather. Your move then, Rick. It requires action on your part, a symbolic crossing of Black Hill, to her door, perhaps. Then she knows how firm her grip on you is – not literally of course... though that as well, I suppose. Unless something has happened, something has come between you already. Think back. Have you said something?

They used my image out of context. Walking too far away from home. But I was less than an hour from my doorstep!

The machine lied. Everyone knows it lies. It lies all the time. Nobody cares. It's just a sea of words out there. People take the words and assemble them to say whatever they want, or expect, to hear.

In other news, the PM catches the bug and takes bad with it. Ten thousand have died in hospital already, and counting. As many again in the old folk's homes, though the counting there seems half-hearted. I wonder about Chester and his weary lungs. The poor bastard wouldn't last five minutes with this thing.

It feels presumptuous to call on Al unannounced. And I have not the balls to ring her and invite myself over – even though she has stripped me naked, and played fellatio on my whistle – though I don't remember it being as erotic as that sounds. More it was... admirably... functional. And I still have the scars.

Instead, I take the Beast out to the supermarket where I discover discouraging queues of forlorn souls slumped over the bars of their shopping trolleys, all spaced two metres apart while they await permission to enter. They are allowed inside in small numbers only, so they can maintain a distance, and not cough on each other. I do not join them, not because I am afraid of catching the bug, more because I have a phobia for queuing – though I am, of course, also afraid of catching the bug. Scientists say I am more likely not even to know if I've got it. This puzzles me since so many are dying, and the hospitals are struggling. Other scientists say if I've got it, I'll definitely know about it.

If we are not lying, we are trying to make it look like we know everything, yet the more complex the world has become, the greater the impossibility of proceeding without mistakes. Why can we not just admit that?

I try ordering shopping from the supermarkets online but the soonest deliveries are a month away, and I never plan that far out. I discover, the mini-mart in Grindleton remains well stocked, but is expensive of a sudden, ditto the various farm shops. Then, as word gets around, the farm shops too become ensnared with desperate queues. Whatever solution you think of, someone has already thought of it, in droves. Like Al, I have a healthily stocked BREXIT cupboard, but this thing could go on all year, and I don't want to deplete it. I mean... Hell, Brexit is coming up in January!

The perfect storm.

Finally I discover a farm shop that delivers an unspecified mixture of fruit and veg in five kilogram boxes. I sign up, having decided to become a vegetarian for the duration, punctuated by the occasional hyper-inflational pizza and cans of beans and soups from the Grindleton mini-mart. It's curious how it can take such a short time for the world to change, and for us all to get used to it.

I hit upon the idea of telephoning Al on the excuse of making sure she is managing for food. Then realise I am lying. That I want to see her, but cannot say it. Still lying then, Rick. And the line is engaged anyway.

Damn. I feel a door is closing here.

What's the matter with me, Annie?

Meanwhile the season matures, the weather turns fine and dry for weeks. The Drinkhouse becomes a popular watering hole of a night, with a lively hubbub coming from the bar downstairs – or so it seems, in the small hours when I wake from my dreams. One night I come down in my pyjamas, push open the door to the front room to find it transformed with a beery haze and a huddle of cloth-capped farming types at the bar, and a man in uniform I recognise at once as my great uncle Charlie.

Yes, thank you. I know I'm dreaming this.

"Uncle Charlie?"

"Keep Annie close for me," he says. "For all of us."

He has that far away, stricken look, that look of doom I see in the photograph. Was it malaria that killed him? Or was it the pandemic that swept those same years, even as we made war? Is this an omen?

Is it going to kill me?

I wake with a start, think back on the dream, reel it in, play it forward again. No... it's not an omen. He was phlegmatic. Life goes on, he was saying. He dies of fever in some god-forsaken place. Never sees his kid again. His wife of only a few years quits England and builds something new, in a harsh land far away, with another man. I'm the only one alive who links them both. Annie and great uncle Charlie, and the clan of whom I am the only living member. Well, there's my kids of course, but they were always closer to their mother and didn't care much for stories of my ancestors.

Yes it's a romantic view, but it clearly means something, because it releases a log-jam of emotion in me. Such a big story; it's romantic, tragic, triumph over adversity – all that yes, the bedrock of existence, and worth the telling. Such stories have their beginnings in the love of youth, and they span the long decades, or in some cases even centuries, as others like me pick up the threads and mythologise the details. I'm a little late to be starting such a story for myself. Most of my lot were done, long before they reached my age. I wonder if anyone will discover me in their ancestral searches, weave a story around me, and call me back across time.

Hell, I hope not. I could do with a rest.

All of this existential pondering inspires me enough to finally set

out across the moor again to the Coppice, perhaps because I would like Al to be a part of such a story, waiting to be discovered and for the future to wonder about the two of us. I would have the catapult in my pocket as I walked as protection from drones – and yes I know how stupid that would be – but I've been practising with it in the garden, and I'm a hopeless shot. It's not about aiming, I've decided. Some people are just good with projectiles, good at bringing things down.

Like Bazzer. He has an eye for it.

In the end, I don't need it. There are no drones, and I wouldn't have dared use it anyway.

I'm not thinking to spend the night with her – I wouldn't be so presumptuous – just call for a brew, check she's okay, see where it leads. Keep it real. And true.

Don't lie, Rick.

I'm not lying. Okay!

Well, all right... so maybe I'm lying a bit.

Still, I do find the prospect exciting – I mean, the thought of just seeing her again.

There are people on the summit of Black Hill, small family-groups in twos and threes. More groups are coming up the track from the Coppice side. I calculate the day. Saturday. Easy to lose track of time when you're retired. I slip off the main track, pick up a more obscure way, not to avoid infection, but to avoid people. The little car-park below the moor is full. A forlorn little sign, hand made by a local resident beseeches people to stay away, stay at home.

Then I come down to the cottage to find Bazzer's car outside and, by implication, him inside. My heart sinks. Indeed, in that moment, I awaken a torrent of emotion from the depths, things I have not felt since I was a boy: irrational, debilitating emotions, feelings of abandonment, betrayal, the disappointment of love!

All right... not love.

Just... something.

But you've been dicking around for weeks, Rick. What did you expect? Did you not value your time with her enough?

But Al and I were a couple. The pandemic had made us so, paired us off, granted us exclusive rights to one another's company. Now that's broken. She broke it. With Baz. I cannot think of her now without imagining her contaminated with him.

No, not contaminated... grow up, Rick.

Sure, I don't know the exact details of what's going on here, not without knocking on the door, and since we're all forbidden from socialising, I can't do that, and I'm relieved because I wouldn't want to do it anyway, wouldn't want to know. But it seems plain enough: I'm still stepping around another story here, the story of Al and Baz. Or maybe you're just no good at keeping women, Rick? You take them for granted, share nothing vital of yourself, expect them to make all the running, and otherwise ignore them, bumble on your not-so-merry way. Then you turn around, and they're gone.

Can you blame them?

Well, that's maybe so, but if you ask me, after all we've said and done, and in spite of all denials to the contrary, she's still Bazzer's girl.

Oh Al, dammit, you really had me going there!

I head back home. Had I a tail it would be between my legs. People are coming down from the moor now, each in their little groups of isolation. They nod their greetings to me as they pass. I do not respond. Instead, I wish the cops and the talking drones upon their heads, wish they would all disappear, leave me to the moor and my emptiness. The fine weather is breaking of a sudden, the temperature dropping, the sky falling, reverting once more to winter on the hill.

Chapter Thirty Six

There are rumours smartphones will become compulsory. This will be in exchange for the social distancing restrictions being lifted, and everyone going back to work. A giant artificial intelligence thing will track all of us to within a meter, all the time. So, if you have been in the proximity of someone infected by the bug, you will be ordered into isolation, you will have to apply online to be tested for the bug. Only the rich thus far can get tests. For the rest of us things seems shambolic.

Green means you can leave your house, red means you cannot. No smartphone also means you cannot. Cops will be spot-checking, fining for non-compliance. If we can ramp up the testing, make it more efficient, it sounds like an effective way of dealing with wave after wave of pandemic. In a global economy, it strikes me such close surveillance will have to be rolled out internationally, and permanently. It also strikes me as the kind of thing that might easily be used for other purposes. So, you were accidentally in the proximity of a suspected code-red subversive? Therefore, you are also now a suspected associate of a code red subversive.

Who decides what is and is not a code red subversive?

It's a pandemic, yes. But for some of a right-wing, authoritarian bent, it is also an opportunity. You think I'm a conspiracist? Conspiracy theories used to be fun. Now they're mainstream, and we're scared of everything.

April blends into May and, as the hawthorn and the cherry-blossoms fade, the death toll crests at twenty six thousand. Farmers begin to block the footpaths, take down the footpath markers. They have always done this – it discourages walkers who have no local knowledge – but the farmers are now more brazen, and go unchallenged. The right-wing press is already agitating for an end to the lockdown, because the owners of capital – and the right-wing press – have lost enough money already. And what's another twenty five thousand deaths, so long as they can be engineered to belong to the economically inactive? to the scroungers, to the homeless, to the elderly already robbed of everything by the care-homes?

Indeed, I sense you're all under pressure to return to your treadmills, and having now lost all of your freedoms – your pubs, your hotels, your entertainment, even your rights of access to that

ten percent of England's green remaining to us – your enslavement is total. Now all your journeys must be necessary, in other words related entirely to your wage-slavery.

It's fine, I can say these things. I'm retired.

I receive an email from Molly who tells me Chazzer has died from the bug. He passed away alone in hospital, hooked up to a breathing machine. He did not die easily. I suspect Chazzer did not like me very much, but there was always the hope of one day persuading him my presence was benign. Now there is not, and I am stunned by the finality of it. She says his family is sparse and scattered, that there will be no funeral. She has made assertive enquiries about collecting his ashes, only to be told this is not possible in the current climate that, anyway, he has already been "disposed" of.

I make back at once: *Collect them, Molly?*

She must be sitting at her computer, waiting on inputs, for she makes back immediately:

We might have scattered them, Richard. On Swirl How. It was his favourite hill. If his family couldn't be bothered, it was our place to make the effort instead, we his only friends. It would have been entirely proper for a group of us to carry him up there and do that.

I agree. That would have been proper. It would have been a spiritual and cathartic thing to have done. But this email ping-pong feels clumsy. She has included her telephone number in her mail-signature, so I telephone her. She picks up at once, sounds angry, upset. I did not know she knew Chazzer so well. She did not, she says but he was, none-the-less, one of us, one of the Autumn Tints.

Solidarity, Rick. Remember that?

I remember also how she kept photographs of attendees from all the conferences she organised, that she even recognised me from one taken thirty years ago. There is something odd and obsessive about Molly, but then no one gets to our age without being free of dents and dings. Her heart though, I suspect, is in the right place.

I tell her we shall do it anyway, when this is all over, and if not with his ashes then we shall simply carry with us our memories of him, then doff our woolly hats to the winds on the summit of Swirl How. We shall cast his name into the heavens, perhaps with a poem – or a line or two from a MacColl song.

"A song?" she asks.

"Farewell you northern hills, you mountains all goodbye,..."

"Go on," she says.

My embarrassment at having spontaneously sung this over the telephone robs me of the rest but it still cheers her a little. "Yes, yes... that would be most appropriate, Richard. And we'll raise a glass of sherry too, perhaps."

"Sherry it is, Molly. Best stuff too, mind." And then I ask, a little too quickly: "Heard anything from the others?"

"The others?"

"Bazzer, Al... Lottie?"

"Not much," she tells me, something guarded in her tone suddenly.

Face like a bag of spuds. A real goer in her youth. Still is, they say. Well,... Bazzer says, and who cares what he says?

Bastard.

Tried to take Al up the arse.

I would never have done that. Never!

Poor Chazzer. I wonder if this means I am promoted to backstop.

Over.

"Well anyway, keep in touch, and keep well, Richard."

"Yes. Thank you, Molly. You too."

I've always found Molly overbearing, pedantic about piddling rules that are largely of her own making. But a thing is either worth something or it isn't. And if it is, then it's worth going for. The Autumn Tints? Worth anything? Yes, I think so. They saved me from my maudlin pit, and under the present circumstances, I find I long to be out with them again. So, Molly is not overbearing or pedantic. She merely stands for values and is courageous in preserving them. Without the Mollies of this world, there is no society, we fall back on barbarism, and we forfeit the right to make unnecessary journeys.

Swirl How? Remind myself: Cumbria – the Coniston fells. Hell, Rick, it's over eight hundred meters, up by Levers Water and the Prison Band, on the main ridge, nearly as high as the Old Man himself. That's tough country. Mountain country. You were in your thirties the last time you crossed that way. Couldn't Chazzer have picked somewhere else, a little less strenuous? By the time this thing is over the Autumn Tints will be well-past their own solstice, and Swirl How might as well be on the moon.

I wonder if Al has heard the news about Chazzer? Give her a ring, then. Are you sure? Yes... sure. You need to lance this boil.

Fast. Then it can heal.

Have you been sleeping with Bazzer, Al?

Line engaged.

Damn. This thing is festering.

I seek distraction by taking the beast to Grindleton, to the mini-mart for supplies. I could walk, but I'd rather not hump tins of beans and soup all that way home in my backpack. So, I park in a side-street, get my stuff, then return to the vehicle to find a note on the windscreen:

You're not from round here, so stay away, or next time the car gets torched and you get knifed.

What the fuck?

This is an unpleasant escalation on top of everything else. People are becoming irrational and menacingly territorial. Like the farmers blocking the footpaths, they don't want that foetid other, carrying disease into their camp. At bottom we are all quite primitive. Only education grants us the means of transcending it, and education, like health, and general intelligence has been in decline for decades.

The miscreant is nowhere to be seen, though I feel curtains twitching.

On the same note I reply underneath: *My name is Richard Jaeger. I am a native of these parts. Next time, have the decency to face me, and tell me your name before you speak your mind, and the courtesy to hear me out while I speak mine.*

But we don't, do we? Face things. We lack courage and we lie. All the time.

Don't we Lottie?

I pin the note to a telegraph pole. You never thought this thing was lurking under the surface, did you? Grindleton is a rural backwater, not exactly your inner-city ghetto, but the ugliness is everywhere now. Thank God we are not routinely armed like they are in America. We would be forming ourselves into vigilante militias. When I call again the following week, the note has gone.

This was my mother's village. I've been coming here since I was a boy. I live not two miles out of it now. Few who live here these days are true natives anyway. All of them are what I suppose I must call incomers. My matrilineal roots are here, my attachment is spiritual, theirs is material and superficial. It is not a living, breathing place to them. It is a dormitory.

Anyway, I'm loading up the Beast with my supplies on this second occasion when Bazzer cruises by. He stops in the middle of the road, winds down his window. He's the last person I want to speak to right now.

"Hey Mick! How's it going, mate?"

"Oh,... Hi, Baz. Not so bad."

"Not got this bug have you?" He laughs.

Sigh. "Not that I know of."

Am I being cool with him? Stop it, Rick. None of this matters. His story with Al continues. You were merely an addendum. He pushed you in front of her, got you burned. Had a right good laugh about it. The pair of them.

Stop, you're imagining all of this.

Life is more complicated.

Stop looking for simple answers.

"Heard about poor old Chazzer?" he asks.

"Yes. Molly told me. How are the others? Heard anything from Al?"

Sorry, I couldn't help it.

"Nah... not seen her mate. You?"

I shrug. *Liar*.

"Tough innit?" he says, shakes his head wearily. "Weird times. What about loopy-Lottie? Heard anything from her?"

Loopy-Lottie?

"Don't know. Not in touch really."

Playful smirk. "That's not what I've heard."

Yea well, that's not what I heard about you and Al. Or rather 'saw', 'mate'.

"What are 'they' saying then, Baz?"

"Oh... that you've been spotted going round her place a bit, like."

I've not been 'spotted'. Lottie lives out in the wilds of West Lancs, down a quiet lane, and behind a ten foot walled enclosure. No one 'saw' me. So who knew? Only Al, because in an unguarded moment, I told her I'd been there, been inside, swam naked while Lottie watched. And Lottie didn't tell anyone because she doesn't actually, you know, speak. Did Al tell Bazzer? Did she tell him *everything*?

No... steady Rick. You're running ahead here, thinking like a jealous teenager. Reel it in, man!

"Just took her home, Baz. That's all. The one time. That day up Holcombe. Remember? Laura's car had packed in."

"No need to be modest, Mickey. I remember the look in her eyes when you were dancing. Tickled her fancy for sure. Wouldn't mind tickling it myself? If you've no objections."

People are still talking about that night?

And what's that he's saying? 'if I've no objections'. Is he testing me over Lottie?

"Well, I think like we've said before, a man would need to be prepared for some complication there, Baz. And Lottie doesn't strike me as the type who'd be responsive to that kind of – em – playful approach."

Or to be more honest, *vulgar*.

He's thinking about this, thinking of a wise-crack, something along the lines of them all being the same with a bag over their heads. Then a truck rumbles up behind him, disturbs our odd little tryst.

"Looks like you're blocking traffic there, mate."

"Aye... well. Nobody's in much of a hurry are they these days?"

He would lose face if he moved off too quickly, I mean, like I would have done – waved an apology, jumped the clutch and set off like a kangaroo in my haste not to offend. But no, Baz has to make his point. And then again neither can the truck driver lose face by remaining patient, like I would have done, Mr. Nice Guy, waiting for ever if need be rather than hit the horn as a demonstration of my manhood. The truck driver gives it five seconds, then hits the horn, adds in some hissing of air-brakes for good measure. Both have made their point, waved their willies at each other. Baz flicks back a merry "fuck off". Always the last word, as if it sticks.

"Take care, Mick. Don't go mixing with too many dirty women, eh? Never know what you'll catch these days."

"Yea... you take care too, Baz."

He pulls away with a clatter, and a puff of diesel.

Out of earshot now: "And the name's Rick."

Dog walkers are staring, that we were talking, that we were not social-distancing. But we were several meters apart. Like the hikers on Black Hill last time, people are interpreting the rules their own way, some to live life as normally as possible, some consigning themselves to self-imposed imprisonment, others to bolster petty prejudice. Neighbours have been denounced to the cops for passing the time of day, incomers have been threatened with violence. All any society needs is a push in the wrong direction, and the

weirdness of mass-psychology does the rest. There is no going back from this. We set ourselves up for it, stood ourselves awkwardly on one leg for far too long. All it took was a single puff of wind to land us flat on our backs.

At this rate, I give us ten years. Less. I give us five.

Al... you didn't really tell him about me and Lottie, did you?

Chapter Thirty Seven

Dear Lottie,... rather a formal start to an email, I know, but "Hi Lottie" sounds too casual for what I'm about to say, so here goes,...

Dear Lottie,

I'm sorry. I'm afraid people are gossiping, saying you and I have developed a 'romantic' attachment, or something altogether more vulgar. My exasperation at this news led me to be less than discreet, divulging details of my visit to you to someone I trusted. I had thought to neuter curiosity by satisfying it with the truth. I realise now this was a mistake. Worse, it seems, those confidences have now been shared with others, taken out of context, and inflated into further nonsense, into lies. I'm writing to tell you I feel ashamed I betrayed your trust.

I know, superficially speaking, we did nothing but drink tea that afternoon, and I swam a little in your lovely pool. But I think about it a lot, actually. For a long time afterwards I felt myself truly refreshed, but now I have betrayed that feeling, and that truth. And that's why I am ashamed.

I'm not writing because I seek your forgiveness. If you are angry with me now, it's nothing I don't deserve, and I trust you not to hold back. I felt it was the proper thing to do, to own up to you, in case you discovered others were talking about us, and specifically the details of that afternoon, and wondered where the information had come from. Because it could only have come from me.

I'm sure others mean no harm. There's nothing we like more than stories and explanations to enigmas, and since I suppose both you and I are enigmas to others by reason of our withdrawn natures, it clears the air if we can be bound together in some way. It tidies us up into the same story, as an item.

I hope, actually, you're not too angry with me. For myself I do feel ashamed, but also angry with myself, and embarrassed, and I offer you my sincere apologies.

Yours in truth, and in friendship.

Richard Jaeger

Okay that's enough painstaking confession for one day, so now just send the damned thing and go mow your grass.

But the mower takes an age to start, necessitates a strip-down of the carburettor and the stink of petrol on my hands. I note petrol is cheap now, less than a pound a litre because no one wants it. The

grass sulks yellow when I'm done, and I'm sweating, and my back is aching. Annie is watching from the shade of the mountain-ash in the corner of the garden. It blew in from the moor, a seed, maybe fifty years ago, or more likely pooped there by a passing bird. It's the only thing that looks and feels healthy. Annie is not for talking, just watches the deflation of my spirits with a thoughtful expression. She confuses me at times, Annie, not Lottie – though Lottie also confuses me.

The moor rises both east and west of the Drinkhouse, and I wonder about clearing my head with a walk, with my one hour of permitted exercise. There are any number of routes I could take within an hour's return of my doorstep, but they seem self-censored for now, as if in solidarity with others who have no green to call their own. And then, as if to reinforce the matter, a pair of drones over-fly the house, bound in a hurry for somewhere else.

I've read the cops are checking number plates, then they can tell if you've travelled away from home to exercise in the countryside. It's hard on those who live in the towns, because even the parks have closed. It's not about solidarity then, it's more like the last thing I want is another humiliating conversation with a robot about necessary journeys. Yes, I know it's a copper speaking through the robot, but the impression is the same - the cyborgification of the State, and our submission to it. I am left then with nothing but the tumultuous inner landscape as I sip tea at my garden table. The warmth is unseasonable warmth and freaky dry.

Meanwhile I'm imagining I'm ignoring the email I sent and any possible reply, while of course thinking about it all the time. Indeed, I am anticipating a reply every minute of the day, and every minute of the day I am telling myself I am not bothered.

The reply arrives in its own time, in the early evening.:

Hello Richard,

It sounds as if you trusted the person you talked to. It sounds like you were in relationship with them and exploring with them the meaning of your relationship with me. It sounds like it was a woman. It sounds like it was Alison.

Please don't be angry with her on my account, and least of all ashamed, or embarrassed. I'm not. It pleases me that afternoon meant as much to you as it did to me. I wondered if I had frightened you by my strangeness. My strangeness frightens everyone, eventually. Thank you for being sensitive to the subtlety of how we passed that time.

I have watched you with Alison. It is Alison, isn't it? You do seem easy with one another and I've felt from the start, since that dreadfully cold and murky day on Pendle, that she had her eye on you, that you are exactly the kind of man she needs. However, I admit this also saddens me a little because you strike me as the gentlest and kindest of men, and she tends not to keep her men very long. This is not to say I dislike Alison – indeed quite the contrary – which is why it would surprise me very much if she has indeed betrayed your confidence.

Could it not have been someone else? Or just a story made up?

You do need to be careful of your feelings, and sure of the ground you're standing on, unless you are in love with Alison, and then all such things will be disregarded, whether they be sensible or not. Rest easy though. I do not judge you, or her. And I am certainly not angry.

You seemed a restless man when I first met you. Talking with Alison has clearly helped with that. Naturally, talking with her takes much less time than it would with me, otherwise I would gladly lend you my ears, and my swimming pool, more often. I do have trouble maintaining relationships – no surprises there. My lack of words and my strangeness can be infuriating, and lengthy emails or even old fashioned letters are no longer quite the thing, are they?

In the spirit of honesty then, I must admit I would very much like to see you again. I don't know the state of your relations with Alison now, and would certainly not want to be the cause of further difficulties between you. But my feelings tell me there is something I want from you, and I have come to the conclusion that what I want, Richard, is to dance with you again.

Yours in truth.

And in friendship.

Lottie.

A number of things strike me about that. First, for someone with no words, face to face, Lottie is dauntingly articulate at the keyboard. It's also interesting she warns me to be careful with Al, as Al warned me to be careful with her. And then,... to dance? The thought of it lights me up, sends me to bed sleepless while I ponder a response,...

Dear Lottie

Thank you for being so magnanimous. You have put me very much at ease. You are correct in your assumptions regarding Alison. Were we

as obvious as that? I'm not sure of my relations with her, exactly. We've not spoken for some weeks, though we parted on good terms and with the expectation we would be seeing each other again. I suspect, however, she is entangled with another man and finding it difficult to let go. This gives me pause, especially since I know this man has visited with Al, and I believe it would now be against the new Covid laws for me to see her again.

The thought of dancing with you does cheer me enormously. Perhaps, when this social distancing business is over, we might go out? I presume there are still places that cater for our sort of dancing still?

Yours

Richard.

Dear Richard,

It is not the going out dancing I would enjoy, so much as the dancing itself, which I have always experienced intensely. I have a summer-room that lets onto the garden. You may remember it? It is perfect for dancing. If you are alone, do feel free to call on me again. I am awkward company, I know, but I do feel at ease with you, since you are not always pressing me for meaningless conversation.

Alison and Barry have been circling each other for years. She moved on some time last year, while poor Barry, in spite of himself, finds it impossible to untangle his feelings. I sense he confuses love with a more earthy passion, is delightfully un-reconstructed in his masculinity. But it also makes him fragile, and emotional – a malaise he loathes within himself, and which, of course, he self medicates with alcohol.

I do not judge Barry, but I do understand him. It may interest you to know I am also an alcoholic, though less well functioning than he, at least I was when I was drinking. I have not drunk (alcohol), actually, for ten years now. But it took a vow of silence to make it stick. We are strange creatures, Rick. The best we can do is tell the truth, even sometimes when it has not been asked for, and others would prefer it if we lied to spare their feelings.

Lottie

Wait... Lottie is a recovering alcoholic? Is that the product of a cruel and devouring mother, against whose memory she self-medicated? And addictions are always with us, never entirely overcome, always a vulnerability waiting to ensnare us and destroy all over again whatever we have managed to restore in the

meantime. Although the news is sobering it does begin to make sense, I mean of her strangeness. We bargain with the gods, make a sacrifice if they will hold true with us. I give you my voice, you keep me from self-harm.

Nice one Lottie.

Dear Lottie,

Your invitation sounds delightful. However, I have been near other people. Well, I have been with Al, admittedly not for weeks now, but it's possible I might be infectious, yet asymptomatic, as they say. It's all terribly confusing and difficult to know what to do for the best.

And then there is this essential travel rule which would rule out any social visit. It's all so strange and awkward, don't you think? There are so many restrictions on our freedoms now, and all of them reasonable under the circumstances, yet troubling in other ways.

When this is over I shall be very glad to dance with you.

Richard

Dear Richard,

do you feel ill right now?

No, Lottie. I feel fine. It's weeks since I was near anyone. But I have read we can carry the virus, without being made ill by it.

Richard,

I am also well. Yes, we could be carrying it, without knowing. But I suspect we introverts are naturally less vulnerable to all manner of socially transmissible diseases. Having no regular circle of acquaintance, social distance is second nature to me, as I'm sure it is to you. My judgement is we are therefore not presently a significant risk to one another. At least not from the virus. Nor are we a danger to others.

The travel rules are strange, yes. I find them vague, and the police interpretation of them seems thus far somewhat subjective, also worrying for the longer term. I appreciate you might not wish to run the risk of being randomly stopped and fined, but in the absence of common sense and truth, we should seek our own.

I am therefore perfectly happy for you to come and stay with me any time, if you like. It feels like the world is falling. So... come stay with me a while, and dance.

Yours in truth

And friendship

Lottie

I recall Al said something similar, that the sun was setting all over the world, so let's have a little fun. *I would like to come against your fingers,* she said. And she did. Softening Al that way, reaching through her armour, is perhaps the most significant thing I've done in decades. But that's over. Bazzer has cut in, and now it's Lottie who wants to dance.

My conversation with Lottie might have taken five minutes over the telephone. By email it takes several days, and plenty of time in between to think, to redraft, to check for truth and lies. And finally, while I am still undecided, she precipitates matters by sending me the code to her gate. She also requests I bring the suit I wore to the Autumn Tints dinner dance, and shoes for dancing. She would like us to dress up.

This is a serious twist in the way – dare I even say a kink? Along with the nude photograph, there is an undertone of eroticism that's hard to ignore, and no matter how noble and chaste I tell myself my feelings are, I am beginning to find it landing somewhere in that liminal zone between disturbing and arousing.

But it's taking every ounce of Lottie's will to hold herself together. She's done a good job of it, but a bad relationship would surely unravel all of that, and probably has in times past. And might I not be just another bad relationship? I can expect nothing from Lottie, except as a friend, and for the person she is. As a lover it would be different. It always is.

And then I realise of course my problem with Lottie is not so much that I fear desiring her. I can always control that.

It's that I fear her desiring me.

Chapter Thirty Eight

In times of uncertainty, times of emotional distress, times when that old black dog comes stalking, any choices we make will always be bad ones. It's better then to do nothing but sink into one's own isolation, to pretend the world beyond the gate has nothing to do with me any more. It would not be the first time for me, nor will it be the last. No one who ponders life's meaning can escape The Dog. It scents you out for haunting.

Say away from Lottie.

Is that you Annie?

No, that's your conscience lacking courage. Nothing to do with me, Richard.

And then:

Phone.

What?

Telephone, Richard.

Oh...

"Hey, Rick. It's me, Al."

"Oh... Al?"

"Have we fallen out or something?"

"What? No, why?"

Liar. Liar.

"Only I remember you setting out over the moor that morning and telling me you'd be back in a few days. I mean... I don't want to sound like the possessive lover, which I'm not of course – depending on how you define that word. But we are sort of committed – I mean by this bug – aren't we? Partners in isolation. That's what we said. Not been seeing anyone else, have you? If you have it's all off, and you can stay the Hell away. No more tea and cakes for you, you feckless bum."

Is she serious?

"I've not been near anyone. What about you?"

A little sharp, Rick.

There's a pause while she thinks about this. "Do I detect a tone there? What does that *tone* mean, Rick?"

"It means, is there still something going on between you and Bazzer? Because if there is, much as I love you, Al – and by that I mean both of you – I'd rather not get caught up in the middle of it.

Whatever *it* is."

Another pause while she untangles this and weighs her return words. Cautious now. "What makes you think there's still something going on?"

"Well, it could be that look on your face every time I mention his name. Or it could be the fact his car was outside your place the day I came down to visit recently. I know we're not exactly courting, like you said, but that was a clear breach of the social distancing rules. Well... that and also not telling me about it."

"Ok-ay." *Long pause, now.* "Sorry, Rick. That's me busted. Believe it or not I was ringing to try and find a way of telling you... I mean, about that. You came by that day? *Shit*, something told me you might. But it was just the one time. An hour. He was only there for an hour. *Dammit*."

"So, it *was* Bazzer?"

"He called to see if I was okay, if I needed supplies. He keeps an allotment... he'd brought carrots and potatoes. He was inside before I thought to stop him, and by then it was too late. You know what he's like? So we had a brew and a chat, cleared the air a bit. So what? I know we shouldn't have but we did. Anyway that was over a week ago, and I'm not sick with this bug, and Bazzer's not sick either, so far as I know. So, all's well.

"Look, Rick, are you telling me this changes things? You are, aren't you? What weird times we live in, eh? I mean, when friends can't see each other, because they've been with other friends. So... does it, Rick? Am I tainted goods now?"

Good point, Al. So how about it, Rick?

"That's not what I mean..."

Liar. We're both lying here. I'm not myself, and Al is being a stranger too.

"Okay," she says. " I think. Heard from any of the others?"

Nicely deflected. Play along, Rick. You don't want to linger on this any more than she does. "Had Molly on the phone, telling me about Chazzer."

"Oh, you heard? That was the other thing I wanted to tell you about. I'm still upset about it. He was a strange old bird, but the Tints won't be the same without him. Heard from anyone else?"

She means Lottie. Have you seen Lottie? Well you haven't have you. Seen her, I mean? You've been exchanging deep and meaningful emails, but you've not actually 'seen' her.

"Only seen Bazzer. Saw him in Grindleton the other day."

"You did?"

"He was passing in his car. Stopped to tease me, about Lottie being my girlfriend, or words to that effect. Al... did you say anything to him... about me and Lottie?"

"Why would I have done that?"

"I don't know. But something's lit him up, and he seemed think I've been going round her place a lot."

"But everyone thinks that. Why would I say anything?"

"What do you mean, *everyone* thinks that?"

"Because she was sitting in your car on the Lumb Road car-park like she belonged there. You don't think people of our age, starved of all romantic intrigue are going to miss a small detail like that and its potential for inflating into a story beyond all truth and recognition do you?"

"But it was your idea I took her home. She could have travelled back with Laura and the AA man."

"Yes, but I knew you really wanted to take her home."

"Since I don't know what I want much of the time, how come everyone else is so sure they do? And is my life really so transparent to casual scrutiny, and misinterpretation? Hell, the security guys don't need to spend much money on tracking me. Maybe they should just ask the guy in the Grindleton stores. He'll have my every move down in his diary, plus a conviction that I'm planning to block central London with a herd of elephants painted in rainbow colours, to protest global warming."

"Ooh. I'd like to see that. If that's what you're planning, count me in. This climate protest stuff sounds like fun."

But she's deceiving you, Rick, steering you away from what you want to know.

"Al... are you telling me there's nothing more to things than that?"

"To what?"

"To the fact Bazzer thinks Lottie's my... *girlfriend*."

Jeeze, that sounds so juvenile!

"All right... all right. He wanted to know about you and me. I mean, if there *was* a you and me, which there is, I hope, still. Sort of. But it was none of his business. So I may have said something... like,... how I thought you were more interested in Lottie – which isn't far from the truth anyway, is it? So I said there were these

rumours... that's all. But I was putting him off the scent of you and me, that's all."

"Rumours?"

"That you'd been seen out in that direction, words to that effect. I kept it vague... sorry, Rick. Is Lottie angry? Is that it? Did she find out?"

Which would explain it, I suppose. So, she'd not told him about me and Lottie really, not the actual truth of it, not broken a trust after all. She'd just made up a story. The rest was my imagination.

Lottie was right.

"She's not angry. Sorry Al... I thought,..."

"You thought I'd told him what you told me... about you and Lottie? You thought I'd told him *everything*?"

Truth Rick: "Yes."

Long silence. "Ooh, that hurts. It hurts you would think I'd do that."

More truth Rick: "I'm sorry, Al. Sorry if I got that wrong."

Okay, that's true enough. Won't help though. You're in a hole, and it's getting deeper.

"All right," she says. "Stop talking a minute while I think about this." She thinks for a long time, then suddenly, angry, but not with me, not entirely at least: "*Fuck it Rick*, I've not felt this in years."

"Felt what?"

"No, stop talking. Let me think this through. You were hurt too, when you thought I'd said that... of course you were. Obviously. Hurt too when you saw Bazzer's car outside, and thinking we had a thing going on, which we did... I mean do. We do have this *thing*, Rick."

"You and Baz? I know."

"No. Me and you. Me and Baz was over, long before I met you. At least for me it was. You know what this means, don't you? No, shut up and listen. It means we're in it deeper than we thought. So... you've heard from Lottie? She's mailed you? She must have done... she wasn't angry, you said. So you've talked about this, with her?"

"Baz was being a bit... vulgar about it. I wanted to apologise to her, in case she'd heard all this stuff from anyone else."

"And now she's invited you round? Is that good guess Rick?"

"Yes, she invited me round."

"So, you'll go to her, but you can't come to me?"

"No, I'm not going round. And for the same reason. It's against

the Covid rules."

"But Lottie's still pure."

"Pure? I don't know what you mean by that. Right now it would be against the law. That's all."

"She hasn't lost her virtue, just her marbles. Be sure what you're getting into there."

"Al..."

"It's okay, Rick. It's cool. Oh, this is all such a mess. I'm sorry. I'll see you around. Okay?"

"Wait, let me..."

I was going to say: 'I'm not getting into anything, with anyone'. I was going to say: 'let me know if you need anything'. But that's lame, and by now I'm talking to the purr of the aether anyway. Is there still such a conceptualisation as "the aether"? It’s a little archaic, I suppose, a little Newtonian. But who cares? I resurrect it.

Anyway, Al has gone, and the bulk of Black Hill has risen another few thousand feet between us. See you around? The way she said it, she was thinking it might not be for a while, and certainly not if she saw me coming first.

Chapter Thirty Nine

But she's right about one thing. I'm hiding my head in the rules, such as they are. And such as they are, they are convenient as an excuse for me to go on doing nothing. I have twenty years before I'm like Chester, half dead in a nursing home, no good to anyone, my pants pissed and my breath smelling of mint imperials. Meanwhile I waste my time, go nowhere but to the mini-mart for basic supplies, and then only once a week, as per the guidelines. But on the up side, no one torches the Beast. Nor am I stabbed by a territorial nativist wing-nut.

I am losing my faith in humanity. People steal, they cheat. And when they're not doing that, they're stoned and useless. *Black dog stalking, Rick.*

So... the rules. Remind me again? No socialising; work from home unless you can't; one hour of exercise per day, staying local, starting and ending from your own doorstep. Of course, 'staying local', regardless of what the drones told me, remains hearsay, and has not made it in to statute. And if you can work from home or not depends on how big a bastard your boss is. This is 'pandemic management' with an indifferent shrug, and fingers crossed behind one's back.

The weather remains fine throughout early May. The moors dry out to tinder like they always do, then someone sets fire to them. The blaze is a few miles away, across the moor, towards Winter Hill. It gathers pace rapidly, but this time the wind takes the fire-front west, away from me, unlike before when the house was assailed for hours, one hellish night, by showers of sparks and an advancing curtain of flame.

I see it strung out over the hill in the darkness, the fire-front, like a devilish army on the march. There is also the strobe of blue-lights from the fire-tenders on the moor road. The smoke is thick the following day, it trails out towards the sea, but it looks like they have it under control. No sooner have the fire-crews gone, someone will torch the moors again. This will either be deliberate or through the proxy of a disposable barbecue, and ignorance. We are too stupid to survive for much longer.

And, sometimes, like now, good riddance I say. Let the dolphins have the crown of sentience, or the octopodes, and hopefully before

we've irreversibly poisoned the seas for them. But I don't mean it. I mean, okay, let the creatures have their sentience – we could probably learn a thing or two from them – but I don't mean... good riddance. That's just a measure of my despair. What I do mean is: what the hell are we to do about it, with the metaphorical fires advancing on every front?

Meanwhile A.N.N.I.E is drowning.

It's as if the virus has entered the collective psyche, made us do strange things, believe strange things, made us say cruel and preposterous things to one another. Some of this misinformation is cultivated, orchestrated by state powers for geopolitical ends. (Never let a good crisis go to waste). With practice, propaganda is recognisable for having a particular feel to it, but mostly its just noise, as individuals struggle for belief in something. Nietzsche was right about that. When we stop believing in God, we will believe in anything. The power of belief will move mountains or it can raze civilisations.

The new 5G cell network is spreading the virus. GM crops are spreading the virus. The Chinese bio-engineered the virus in order to gain world domination. The American military sneaked the virus into China in order to gain world domination. There is no virus. It's an excuse to usher in the surveillance state.

The virus can be cured by drinking bleach. It can be cured by injecting fish-tank cleaner. Denmark does not exist. The righteous should ignore social distancing and go to church. God will protect us. Anyone who dies did not believe in Him enough. Big Pharma created the virus in order to profit from sales of a vaccine. The vaccine is a cover for injecting microchips into people.

Certain politicians are not people at all. They are lizards.

Good luck with that lot, A.N.N.I.E, though speaking for myself I could not be bothered.

Meanwhile, I pull up the drawbridge of my castle, let the storm rage, except for my one hour of allotted exercise per day, which takes me to the summit of Cartridge Hill, and back. This lies to the east of the Drinkhouse, away from the Coppice, and Al. It requires a stiff pace, and not much time to linger on top, but this suits my frame of mind. I would describe my frame of mind as peculiar. I feel like a teenager wounded by the craving for love. Then I look in the mirror and see an old man looking back at me, a man who should have the presence of mind to know better. But here we are.

The moors around Cartridge Hill have a darker look about them, an upland plateau, potholed with ancient mine-workings. There were fires here too, last year, sections of the moor that resemble the surface of the moon now and will take decades to recover, though plenty remains yet to burn. There is a fine view of the western moors. Black Hill in particular has a shapely look about it. And on certain days, the landscape towards the Coppice, glows softly in a dappled light, as if to seduce me back to Al. But there has come a stupidity between us now, as well as the law, and words are useless.

It is the finest of vistas, occasionally transcendent, but this reminds me of the waste, that so many of us are enamoured of ugliness, they make fools of the rest for their optimism. They do not so much shower the candle of hope with a tease of rain, as piss on it with malice. Extinguishing hope is the devil's work, and we should have none of it. Easy to say though. For now, here I am, sitting on a pile of stones, with a Thermos of soup, my grump-face on, pretending I'm happy with my solitude, and nothing but my highfalutin' thoughts for company.

It isn't working.

I cannot see Al or Lottie.

Don't want to see them, either.

Liar.

Well... let's face it. I've blown it with Al, and I don't know what to do about Lottie. I'm afraid our subtle game will lead to seduction, and the disintegration of truth in the inevitable heat of lust and the greed of sex. Why else send me that damned inflammatory picture? For now only the rules protect me: no socialising, no driving anywhere, except to buy food. That much is clear, even though many are ignoring it... like those fools who set the moor alight...

And like the group coming up the hill just now, all eight of them. They are four couples, noisy, chatty, a garrulous knot of gaily coloured Spandex, and expensive boots, dogs on the loose, of course, in ignorance of ground nesting birds. If one of them has the virus, they all have it by now. Transmission through pets is inconclusive. But that's fine, remember? It only kills the old, and the weak, and the sooner the rest of us get it, the sooner the herd will become immune, though the devil take the hindmost. A quarter of a million of us. Hell, I hope that's not the plan. I hope the powers that be are not just running round like chickens without heads, panicking.

We need a plan, a strategy to deal with this.

I make my move before the hikers catch up, wave my hat to them as I depart. They wave back, in good cheer. This is not the truth of comradeship. This is me saying I am afraid you will kill me if I am not polite to you. Lottie was right. We misanthropic introverts have been social-distancing all our lives. We'll be the last to catch it. The last to die. But this is not truth. It is cowardice.

The death-toll has passed 60,000 now, or 40,000, or 35,000, depending on where you get your figures. Either way we have fared worse than any European country, though official comparisons are no longer being made, for reasons of national embarrassment. People are grumbling the restrictions came in too late, others are grumbling there are restrictions at all. Curiously the fault-line maps the same political territory as the BREXIT debate. Leftist nut-jobs versus right-wing nut-jobs. Brexiteers want the economy back up and running and to hell with the virus. The remainers want the lock-down in place for as long as it takes, and screw the economy.

Curious.

Me? I don't care any more. I have a personal mythology to untangle here before I die, whether that be from Covid or old age, and that's far more important to me now than stupid politics.

Wait, did you really just say that, Rick?

What's been happening to you?

The trend suggests we have reached peak deaths, so I surmise we are half way through the first wave of contagion. Logically speaking we must therefore expect at least 120,000 deaths in total. This is more than the number of civilian deaths in the second world war. Not six months ago, I was counting votes. Now I am counting casualties.

"Make your own common sense, Rick."

"What's that Annie?"

"Stay at home. Save lives."

But in staying home, at what point does the life we are living become not worth the living? And we could say that about any sort of living, the so called high-life even... however one defines it. And how would you define it, Rick? Right now, a map, a compass and a hill, whenever I please, and not the crowds to spoil it for me with their noise and their thump-whack music, and their portable barbecues, and their bags of dog-turds. Nature where man has never trod, yet friendly to the soul. No, not man, only men as virtuous

as... who? You, Rick?

All right, so I'm not perfect, but I'm doing the best I can.

Email this morning from Chester's family. The virus has penetrated the care-home, and three have died. Chester is not among them. He sends me his best wishes, sends regards also to Mel. I did not write back to explain to his family my wife is dead. I never do. I would sooner spare them the distress of thinking they have distressed me.

"But that's not cowardice, Rick. Wanting to spare the pain of others is virtuous."

"Don't confuse me, Annie."

I hope Chester is being respectful to his carers.

"Maybe you should look Lottie up. See how she's faring."

"Are you kidding me? That's the last thing I should do."

Chapter Forty

The phone is ringing when I come back to the house. I can hear it from the garden gate, but I don't rush, let it ring off, then regret it. It would not be Lottie, obviously. Al perhaps? Still, I don't know what to say to Al that I have not already said, and would not sound like I was pleading for forgiveness, when we are both guilty of untruths. There is much to be said for Lottie's vow of silence. It's harder to lie when you say nothing at all.

It rings again in the evening. I am chasing links down on Ancestry and have just discovered Annie Monroe came back to England in 1960, the year she retired. This lights something up in me, and Annie reappears, sitting prim on my sofa.

Why, Annie?

Em... phone, Rick.

It's nothing... let it ring. Why'd you come back?

Never mind that. Answer it. It might not be Al.

But how do you know...

Just do it!

Okay, so...

"Em... hello?"

"Richard? It's Molly."

Argh! Molly, again? She sounds bright and breezy this time. I suspect subterfuge. I do hope she's not one of those Autumn Tint ladies with claws that Bazzer warned me about. I hope that satsuma did not come with conditions. Why was I not such a babe-magnet in my twenties? It would have done far more for my self esteem. Nowadays it's just confusing.

Right little goer in her day. Still is.

Shut up Baz.

So...

"Em.. hi Molly."

"How do you fancy that hike up Swirl How?"

"What?"

"We can do it now. The rules have changed."

"Since when?"

"Since this morning. Glad I'm retired too, or it would have been back to work on Monday."

"But, what happened to 'stay at home, save lives'? We're only

just past the peak."

"That's changed to 'stay alert'."

"Stay alert? What the hell does that mean?"

"Haven't a clue. Everyone's laughing about it"

"But... it's not funny, Molly. This is not the time for word-games... people are dying."

Though admittedly they are mostly only poor and old.

This can't be right. We're only just over the first wave. Now we're risking another? Do the rich think they are immune? Of course they do. They do not toil cheek by jowl in their own sweat-shops.

"But the point is," she says, "we can drive anywhere in England now, and the cops can't stop us. We can meet up with one person from another household, exercise as much as we want. So, shall I meet you in Coniston? Are you up to it? Hell of a hike though. I've been looking at the map. I talked to Al for advice on routes, but she says it's not a good idea yet. Thought you might have other ideas. I'm thinking we go up by Levers Water and the Prison Band."

"Well... I'm sure what Al means is little places like Coniston aren't ready for the usual numbers of visitors yet, whatever the law from London says. Are you sure this is right? The mountain rescue teams will be furious."

"Oh, they are. But it's the letter of the law, Richard. Still, if you don't think it's a good idea... fine. But I'm going stir crazy at home. The garden's spotless. I've painted the shed, and about a mile of fence-panels. There's nothing left to do. I'm desperate to get out."

"Well, I do think we need to wait a bit longer, Molly. London is another country, remember? It's different here. We'll keep an eye on the mountain-rescue web-sites for advice. If they're happy we go, I'm happy. And we go. Em... preferably with the others. But wait... you said we can drive anywhere without the cops stopping us, now?"

"Only if you're heading out for exercise, and so long as you don't cross over into Wales, Scotland, or Ireland."

"Why? Do they have a different virus to us?"

"Not as far as I know."

"So that means they think London is mishandling things?"

"Obviously. Well, aren't they?"

"And I can meet *one* other person?"

"Yes, but you can't meet them at their house, or in their garden,

and you have to stay two meters away from them at all times. Sounds silly really. There's plenty now who've met their bosses, but still can't see their families."

Molly sounds like she's enjoying the details, and maybe that's it. She's just ringing for a chat. People do that, apparently, Rick. I wonder about my kids, riding the tubes again, packed onto busses. We're cooking up a massacre here.

"So... anyway, are you keeping well?"

"Oh, I'm fine, Richard, and you?"

"Can't complain."

"Who were you thinking of seeing, then?"

"Eh?"

"Am I wrong or did I detect between the lines you were wondering about a person you can't meet at their house, or in their garden, and you have to stay two meters away from them?"

Molly is sharp! "Well, that would be no one, Molly. Better to keep my own company I think. Especially when I've got my grump-face on."

"And why would that be? The grump face."

"Same as usual; self loathing; the realisation of my naivety at the ways of the world. And the thought I could ever do anything about it."

"Ah, you're talking about the class struggle."

"Am I? I thought it was politics actually."

"Same thing. I've been thinking about this too. We're just a blip, Richard. Our generation – well, mine and yours. I'm older than you, had longer to think about these things. We did better than our parents because education was free. There was a ladder from the bottom to the top. Now it's gone, and our kids are struggling. Bad jobs. Poverty wages and corrupt masters. Same as our great grandparents, only with computers and spread-sheets. If you and I were a hundred years younger, you'd be driving a delivery van and I'd be in a shop, both of us on minimum wage. Kiss your PhD goodbye, Richard."

"You know... I always wondered if you were one of those Reds they keep going on about in the Daily Mail, Molly. You are aren't you? A fellow traveller?"

"Well, I could be. But... all respect to our brothers and sisters at the reddest end of the spectrum, to change things you've got to be in power."

"So, you'll be a centrist then?"

"Might be. I do know you were an activist. Climate. Anti-fracking. And you were a Corbynista, Rick."

Now we're getting to it. "Just because I posted a few leaflets doesn't make me a Corbynista. No shame in it though. And anyway, how would you know all that?"

"Saw your name on a list recently. Are you still with the party?"

List? What list? "No, I'm done with that. The country got what it voted for – dare I even say it got what it deserved? Nowadays I want nothing more complicated in my life than a hill and a map and a compass. So... you're either an activist yourself, or you're with the secret police."

"Careful using that word over the telephone."

"Activist, or secret police?"

"If I said I was thinking of running for councillor?"

"I'd say good luck to you."

"Will you help?"

"No point. Council elections are years away. We'll all be dead by then Molly."

"No harm in you saying yes then is there? Like you said, London is another country. It's the councils that make the difference locally, the councils that have the power to change lives. I'd like you on my team."

Or do you just want my list of party contacts?

"Lefty councils under right wing admins just get their budgets cut so they can do nothing except count the potholes in the road. And now the bodies. And come the next election, we'll all vote for another right wing administration, maybe even further right than this one. Unless you can neuter the press, which either lies or simply hasn't the guts to tell the truth, and the Internet of course, which wouldn't know the truth if it fell over it."

"Ah... well, if only, Richard. And how would we do that? Neuter the Internet."

Okay... it hasn't escaped me, the possibility Molly is indeed some sort of informant, if only for the incongruity of her plummy accent. History tells us how even the most harmless of groups are routinely infiltrated by the security services. So no, I'm not about to divulge information about A.N.N.I.E. Still, my suspicions make me wonder if this paranoia comes out of isolation from the pandemic, and makes me see people in a different way, makes me see them all as

sources of contagion, and not so much viral, as lies. Lies these days are a permanent pandemic, but we don't call it that any more.

"So," says Molly. "I'll put you down as a maybe then?"

"I don't know, Molly. How do I know I can believe in you? What's your position on the criminalisation of trespass? What 's your position on Climate break-down?"

"I don't know, Rick. Whatever's most likely to get me elected, I suppose. I'm serious."

"I'm sure you are, and I wish you well. But, seriously, I'm out."

"Well... worth a try."

It would explain how she knows so much about me, even that little snippet about lecturing at the Manchester Metropolitan, decades ago. She didn't remember me from a photograph. It's more plausible she read it in a file, and invented a story to explain her knowledge. But how do we know if something's true when all we're used to hearing, all the time, are lies?

"I know nothing of any relevance, Molly."

All right, I'm swerving about here. But it's all happening at once, and I'm confused by it. Politics. Annie. Lottie. Molly. Al. And then the little issue of a global pandemic. It's hard to keep a lid on it, hard to keep myself screwed down tight, let alone know what any of it means. And I keep blathering on about Nietzsche don't I? And I know that's not helping, because there's only one thing worse than people who are too clever for their own good and that's those who like to give the impression they're cleverer than they really are, by dropping clever names into an otherwise middling conversation.

Kant. Schopenhauer. Jung. Freud. Nietzsche. I learned these names from Rachel. Smart girl, Rachel. She could quote Marx at me too, but knew nothing about lasers, nor even what fraction of a second it takes monochromatic light to travel the distance of a meter.

All of which isn't much use to you out here, is it Rick? Measuring the length and the breadth of the physical world isn't much use, when dealing with the world of men. You spent your whole life learning about something it turns out is no use to you now, and you wish you'd learned something else instead. You try your best with that, but all you hear are people shouting.

Sure, you can hear him in the bar of the Drinkhouse. Nietzsche, I mean. He's the one you can rely on always to drink too much, gets shouty and argues with everyone. And no matter what anyone says

or how sensible it seems, he calls them a moron. And even if they change their mind to agree with him, he calls them an even bigger moron and changes his mind so he can disagree with them all over again. But time and time again I see where he's coming from, and me in the centre of his gaze, berating me for a fool.

Wake up, Richard. Be alive. Be powerful. Tell the truth.

"Behold, the nice guy," he says, swaying on his stool, eyes swivelling, giant moustache twitching. "But is that because he's genuinely good? Or just too cowardly to be bad?"

Well, I don't know, mate. And that *is* the truth.

The one time I wilfully broke the rules was because I wanted to do some good, but I nearly went to prison for it, and that scared me so much I'll never do it again. I shall do neither genuinely good, nor genuinely bad and thus become the last man, biding his time in a prison of his own making, seeking only comfort as his prize, and all I have to do to achieve that is sit back and lie to myself all the time.

About everything.

"You still there, Richard?"

Who cares if Molly's a spy? If you're out, you're out, Rick. And you never knew anything anyway.

"It would be impossible telling you everything I know, standing two meters apart, Molly. When they lower it to a meter, and when they open the fells, we'll go up the Prison Band together, and you can pick my brains then."

Friends close, enemies closer, and all that?

Chapter Forty One

What is this, Rick? Molly a spy? Is our story becoming even more of a paranoiac intrigue? A political pot-boiler? Or is it just nostalgia for the mass trespasses and the working class movements of the nineteen thirties and, by association, your own working class past?

Well, in case you hadn't noticed – and I hadn't either until now – it seems to have been about freedom. And freedom does not come without responsibility. And responsibility boils down to the fact we must each of us hold to the truth, speak the truth, at least in so far as we see it. Because if we cannot, or dare not speak the truth, it corrupts the world. And when there are so many lies they become indistinguishable from truths, when the very currency of our affairs is nothing but lies, the world collapses into its own foetid mess and violence, and then the only sound shall be the weeping of mothers for their murdered sons.

I'm not sure if that's what Lottie means by speaking the truth, if I'm raising her to the mountains here, making a goddess of her again, as I once made of all women. But if that's what it takes, then so what?

These thoughts come to me while I'm out walking, and that's good, because I think it was Nietzsche who said only those thoughts reached while walking have any value. Yes, he said that in 'Twilight of the Idols', which Rachel had me labour through once. I shall allow him that. And like he also said, instinct trumps the rational workings of the human mind, or words to that effect. Instinct trumps the word-gamery of the philosopher's dialectics.

This too comes as I am walking.

Good. Keep going, Rick.

But he said a lot of other stuff as well, like how the institution of marriage was ruined the day men could no longer look upon their wives and children as possessions. So... needless to say, he doesn't always time-travel well. I am sorry he was disappointed in love. Perhaps, like me, he expected too much of his women. Like everything else, we cherry pick the past, use it to prove whatever point we want. Me. Him. It doesn't make any of it true.

Anyway, I'm on my way back up Cartridge Hill, early evening this time. The moors have been busier of late as the lock-down crumbles, with many still on the furlough scheme. True, some are

trapped at home, afraid to step outside, but the rest are treating it like one long summer holiday. And why not? Me? I'm sticking to the rules, even as our leaders selectively flout them. I intuit they have decided to let the fates decide the living and the dying, to gamble that a quarter of a million dead will be safely covered over by the obfuscation algorithms come the next election. But I don't want to expire from a bug. I want a ringside seat at the end of the world. I want to look down nature's salivating maw when it comes for us. It's my responsibility as a human being, as one small self-reflective piece of the universe, to bear witness to either its or our end.

Strange thoughts, Rick.

Almost idealism.

Nietzsche would be throwing beer-bottles at you by now.

The roads are busier, and the cars seem to be moving faster than ever, as if to invite a fatal impact. The beaches of Bournemouth have been pictured, everyone squashed together in their thousands. Pretty little Burnsall, in the Dales, was similarly inundated. In both places, the pilgrims have left a blizzard of litter. Thus, I am thinking to avoid the day-tripping, Covid spreading crowds by stepping out later in the day.

But then to walk of an evening is to risk encountering another kind of crowd. They come from the towns, but usually only after dark, and they gather for the exchange of body fluids and sexually transmissible disease with strangers. I'm sure I'll be fine at this in-between hour though, and anyway the area isn't known for that sort of thing. Except I hear loud music now, two beats per second, signature of the zombie dawn, pounding, scrambling thought, and scaring birds.

I am following a plantation trail, pine scented. The earth is dry and dusty underfoot. I turn a corner to find a girl spread-eagled over the bonnet of a car, legs akimbo, knickers hanging from one ankle. I'm wondering if there's been some kind of accident, except I notice she is imbibing laughing gas from a balloon, and barely conscious. She makes no effort to recover her modesty, which, aside from the covering of her pubic hairs, is most immodestly displayed in all its – shall we say – inglorious capaciousness.

I take it she is post-coital, indeed has recently finished copulating with the naked man who is squatting in the dust, his back against the offside wheel. From the stink of it, he is high on

something stronger than nitrous oxide. I give a wide berth, though neither seem to notice me, this passer-by, out of place and time, sometime circa nineteen thirty. I hope they are careful of matches. This place is a powder keg of dryness, and centuries-old. It would be a tragedy to lose it in a moment of intemperate carelessness.

Lord, I'll be seeing that slack vulva in my sleep. It's enough to put a man off sex, and it makes fun of all the times he has had sex in the past and thought it the loveliest thing in the world. I mean... to reduce it to something trivial, a mere adjunct to psychoactive inebriation.

There may be more of them later on – I suppose they call them "doggers" still? So, I shall have to find another way home. The police designate their haunts as public sex areas, and tolerate them as such, for all their gross indecency. But the sites move around, and it takes some inside knowledge to keep up.

Never mind it now, Rick.

The sunset over Black Hill is extraordinary, and I have the summit to myself this evening.

I'm thinking when the bars and the restaurants open, as they are bound to do soon, breeding Covid back to pandemic levels, I will at least have recovered the moors as my own, and to Hell with the drones scaring me away from them. Wait... I see cars turning off the road now, bumping along the plantation track, below. Sex and drugs, and fast cars. What better way to kill ourselves while hiding from the discomfort of untruthful lives?

Oh shut up Rick.

I note the fire over Winter Hill has flared up again, and there's another to the North, a vast plume of tobacco-coloured smoke drifting west and amplifying the drama of the sunset. It must be beyond Preston... Longridge maybe, or perhaps even Pendle. We've not had a drop of rain for months. These are our last remaining open spaces, the last small pockets of refuge for our wildlife, and what do we do? We set fire to them.

There's a figure out on Black Hill, by the cross shelter. I see it through the bins. It could be a woman. I wonder if it's Al. It's her nearest summit after all, and a woman like that's not going to be kept from the hills for long. I can't tell, but I hope it is. I hope she comes down the other side to my door – that she's sitting on the step when I return, waiting for me.

"Just passing," she says.

"Fancy a brew, then?"

"Okay."

A look, a shrug. She throws me a hug, and all's forgiven.

I note Annie's sitting out by a tumble of drystone wall, now, and the look on her face tells me I shouldn't get my hopes up.

"It's all right. I'm not stupid, Annie."

"I know you're not, Rick."

"So, why'd you come back to England, anyway? I had you out there to the end of your days. What happened in 1960?"

"Lost my man, Rick. My second man, that is. Couldn't manage the farm on my own. Sold it. Retired to a little place in Perth. You know that."

But her man died in '55. Frank, Frank Stern.

"Did you have any kids, you and Frank? There are no records in Australia, so I'm guessing you didn't. I know you and Uncle Charlie had a kid, Ewan. Got him living in Ulverston, after you left. But I'm guessing he died."

"What makes you think that?"

"He never joined you in Oz, so far as I know. Why'd you leave him behind?"

"Those weren't luxury liners, Rick. They were like cattle boats. No place for a small child."

"So, you thought to leave him safe with family, until you were more settled?"

"That was the idea. Not easy though, leaving your kid behind. Still, I was under no illusions going out. Hard enough without a kid to feed. So I'm thinking, secure my place, then bring the kid out when he's older. That's what you would have done, right?"

"I suppose so. Must have broken your heart though."

"You wouldn't be wrong there. Worth checking out, though, right? What happened to my kid?"

"I'll do that. Just as soon as I get back."

"No rush, Rick. Get some sleep. Get some dream time. And another thing, forget this damned Nietzsche guy. He was a brain for sure, but he's no good for you."

"You reckon?"

She takes my arm and we begin a slow descent into the setting sun. *Yes, I know this is imaginary, and weird, but I do it a lot. So get over it.*

"It's just an avenue of thought, Rick, like any other."

"How do you mean?"

"Your existentialists. You want me to boil them down for you?"

"I wish you would."

"Okay. So there is no God, no life ever-after. Life is what it is, and there's no point to it, so it's to each of us to make the best of ourselves in the life we've got. No sense banking on rewards in the next, because there isn't one. That's the bottom line of existence, according to your existentialists, right? Bleak, but logical, given the evidence of the day. That's existential thinking... that's your guy, Nietzsche and all those who followed him. And given the history of the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, who can blame them? But it's just another way of seeing things, that's all. It's not the *only* way."

"All right. Yes, but it's a long time since I believed in magic, Annie."

"Bless you, Rick. Think about time."

"Time?"

"Time is just the way we put things in order. It seems to flow in one direction, right? But then here's you and me, talking across near a hundred years, like it's the most natural thing in the world."

"Only because I've a screw loose. And we both know I'm making all of this up."

"Sure. I know. Lovely though, isn't it?"

"Yes, yes... I'm glad I found my way to you, Annie."

"Me too, Rick. But dig a little deeper, will you? You know I had a kid with Charlie, right? Dig a little more. Find out what happened to the kid."

She would have said more, I'm sure, but suddenly we're both looking at the Drinkhouse, not a hundred yards up the road, and at the plume of smoke and the lick of flame coming from the plantation behind. It's a good quarter mile from the house, but when dry pine-wood catches, it catches deep and burns fierce for days. So then I'm on my own, running. I burst indoors, and I call the fire brigade, like they haven't got enough to do already.

Emergency. Which service do you require?

Just like in olden times.

If the plantation goes up, it'll take a few centuries of green, and the house with it for sure this time. So, I'd better pack a bag, sling whatever stuff I need in the Beast. Essentials only.

Just in case I have to bolt.

But what's essential?

Depends if you're an existentialist and a materialist, Rick, or if, in spite of everything, you still believe in magic.

Laptop, both of them; duvet, pillow, clothes I'm wearing, plus a change.

I'm done. Ready. Let's go.

Except I have nowhere to go.

England is on its knees, but there's still a fire-engine outside my house in ten minutes. I recognise the crew from last time, can tell from their sweaty, soot-smeared expressions, this is likely to be a bad one.

First thing they do? They send up a drone.

Chapter Forty Two

Okay. Dawn. Five-ish, curtains moving in a cool press of air from the window which is open a crack. Scent of furniture polish, and jasmine. Sounds of wood-pigeon cooing, blackbirds chuckling. Clearly not my usual bedroom. Were it so, it would be crows, the foragers of carrion.

His name was Ewan.

Who?

Annie's son.

But then I already told you that. Birth certificate. Baptism records. I'd also got him living with aunts, Annie's sisters, in Ulverston. Census records, for 1931. I've imagined him swapping poignant letters from there with his mother, out in Oz. How long for a letter to and from Australia in the thirties?

Months.

But then like Annie said, I dug a little deeper. Don't know why I'd not pursued him before. He was a bright kid, won an Engineering scholarship to the University of Manchester. Probably studied in the same buildings as me. But whatever his plans were after that, they ended up on the shelf when the second war intervened. He was called up into the East Lancashires. Private Monroe, like his father before him. Cannon fodder, like his father before him. He'd married too by this time, had everything to lose. Like his father before him.

Wife's name Sara, and a daughter called Rose.

These things are revelations to me.

Let me explain:

The algorithms of the Ancestry software search for connections while you're offline. You get notifications now and then when it turns things up that might be of interest. I presume it works on surnames, dates of marriages and deaths, census forms. Most are false alarms, so I tend to ignore them, but now and then they nail in a plank or two that gives passage to a whole new episode of discovery. It was therefore just an idle click, inspired by a prompt from my imaginary conversations with Annie that revealed all of this.

He was killed in heavy fighting against German armoured units, near the village of Grimbiémont, in the Ardennes, January 7th

1945.

How we lost touch with Ewan, I don't know. He was my mother's cousin after all, my great grandfather's grandson. Yet his name does not feature in the family lore, though usually the war-dead, like Charlie, are always remembered, held close within families, names passed on, passed down the generations for safe keeping. All I remember is talk of Charlie, hushed tones, *lost in the war*.

I suppose it was Annie's family who took possession of Ewan then, Annie's family who remember him, they who have custody of the grainy photographs. Is this why Annie has haunted me? His life was expunged from the record of my own clan. Now she makes me write it down, and own it back?

Let's get this straight then: Charlie and Annie had a son, Ewan, born in 1915, and the son had a daughter, Rose, born in 1940. Rose might still be alive, a grand old lady, and she might easily have children of her own, children of my own generation.

Oh, wait...

Why do I recoil from that?

With ancestry the trail generally leads further back in time, but now and then you find yourself tracing a thread forward, into the present, towards unknown cousins of the first and second type. I do this cautiously. You know why: it's only the dead who interest me. The living can be so much more problematic. You can pick your friends, but not your family. Me? I'd sooner do without either.

You don't mean that, Rick. You're just sickening for something.

"Is that it then," says Annie. "Don't you want to know any more?"

"I guess not."

"But you might have living blood relatives."

"Blood?"

"Same blood in them as there is in you."

"So what? Go far enough back, and we're all related."

"That's not what I mean."

We're on the porch of the farm again, sun going down. Annie looks older now, as old as me maybe, strands of grey in her dusty hair. She's sweet, beautiful, a beauty that rises from a heart that does not fade with age.

"Okay, so you sold up in 1960, moved to Perth. I know that. What I still don't know is why you came to England in the same year."

"Maybe I went to find my granddaughter. Maybe I went out to Belgium to find my son, then out to Greece to find my first husband. Could be lots of reasons. You'll never know for sure. Don't waste your time searching for any of that. There's no trace of me there, except what's here. This isn't about me. You get that, don't you?"

"Okay. You're saying it's all lost to time. We rarely resolve the past to such fine detail, I mean without diaries and such. We can imagine what we like, turn it into myth, but it's hard to get at the truth."

It gets fuzzier, the closer you look at it.

Annie gazes out over the soft, green hills, tips her chin to the distance. "Big spread, isn't it? Me and Frank, we made a fair go of it out here. Just wilderness when we came. Frank worked like a demon. Me and Charlie, we had nothing in Blackburn. Rented a two-up two-down in a back-street slum, and it was always a struggle to keep up. Nothing but the mill for either of us, and the mill would have killed us both. But this? Got to be worth a bit, don't you think? Worth a lot more than that pretty little beach-house I bought in Perth anyway. There's probably pictures online if you wanted to look that up. You have the address? Maybe it's still there. Might make you wonder if I got such a bad deal, what with this being one of the most profitable stations around. Or it might make you wonder what I did with the rest of the money."

"You're saying you left a lot of money?"

"Maybe I did. You could probably find out. Wills and such from way back are all public record aren't they?"

Dreams... yes, I know I'm dreaming all of this. In part. It's what I do. But in part also I'm imagining it as consciousness moves in and out of focus, and that cool press of air moves the curtains. I'm weaving a story from the bare facts of the record, as captured by Ancestry's archives.

For sure, the history of the world throughout the twentieth century was cataclysmic, at least in so far as its ninety nine percent were concerned. It always is, I suppose, and the twenty first isn't shaping up to be any better. Nearly half a million killed in Iraq for a start, a hundred thousand in Yemen so far, six hundred thousand or so in Syria. That's what genealogy teaches, teaches also the fact that you're alive at all, whilst a miracle of sorts, can, from a certain shallow perspective, be interpreted as meaningless. No use denying

that.

So you're really into magical thinking now, Rick? Welcome back.

No, don't rush me, I'm not there yet.

For now, we just have to get on, make the best we can of things, and don't tell lies.

"I'm sorry Annie. Two husbands gone, and your son too."

"Don't feel sorry for me Rick. That's not what I want."

"What's my link with you? Charlie was my blood. Yet I don't see him half as much in my imagination as I see you."

"Charlie's at peace. I'm not."

Okay, enough.

Now I'm waking to a bedroom on the plains of Western Lancashire, the curtains moving in that steady press of sweet, clean air. There comes the tinkle of a teacup as it is placed at my bedside.

Lottie puts a finger to her lips... "Shush". N*ot to disturb,...* then backs away, silent as a butterfly, and colourful in yellow satin.

But she can't help disturbing me, momentarily, at least. Or rather it perturbs me, how her presence can induce such calm – if that is not too much of a contradiction. Her hair is wet from her swim. She rises with the sun here, swims early.

Then brings me tea.

Yes, I am with Lottie now. At least of a fashion.

One thing just led to another and well...

Chapter Forty Three

The smack-heads and the doggers did not burn the Drinkhouse down. It is as if something ancient and supernatural protects it. The fire brigade saved much of the plantation too, but they were damping down for days, and the stink of wood-smoke lingered. It rendered the house uninhabitable, had me wheezing and teary-eyed. Even with the windows sealed shut, the nastiness found its way inside.

"Nowhere else you can go for a bit, mate?"

"Not really. Anyway, aren't we all supposed to be social-distancing?"

The fireman peeled off his helmet, wiped a sooty face on his sleeve. "I think most folk seem to have given up on that. Anyway, I hear they're going to relax the two meter rule soon. Bring it down to a metre."

"Really? Is that safe?"

"Right now? Ask me, is it fuck as like."

It's hard to know what the rules are now, because they change so quickly. They are blending into rumour and supposition. Blink and there's a whole new world out there, yet still dangerous and uncertain. But the bottom line is I did need to get away – the smoke was making me ill. So I packed more stuff into the Beast and headed out. I was thinking I could drive down to the beach at Southport, or Ainsdale, park up for the day, dose up on sea-air, come back at night. It's just as well I didn't; the beaches were crammed, traffic jammed for miles around, all trying to get the last few square yards of sand.

Then I was thinking I could sleep in the car, somewhere quiet. Just for a few days. There must be somewhere no one else has thought to go.

But if you were planning on roughing it, Rick, why pack the spare clothes, and especially the holiday jim-jams. It's not like there are any hotels open.

Okay, okay... so I knew the route to the coast took me through Middleton, and out across the plain. Of course I did, and all of that just a short detour to Lottie's place. I'd read it was okay now, that she and I could stand in a private garden, say, or over a fence, and I could ask her if she was all right. So that's how I came to be at the

intercom by her gate, not sure what to say now, stumbling for what was true, fearing that only truth would open the gate when all I had to offer were lies.

And the truth was: *let me in Lottie. I need your serenity.*

"Hi Lottie, it's Rick... em... just passing. I thought I'd call and see how you were managing... em... I know it's a bit... sudden... but..." And so on, and so on,... pathetic.

Truth, Rick?

The gate opened.

Her frown when she met me on the driveway was a rebuke at my apology for disturbing her.

After all, had she not already invited me?

Yes, but...

"Problem at the house actually... nearly got burned down. So... just out for a bit of air, away from the smoke. I was heading over to Ainsdale, actually."

She nods, cautiously, eyeing me now, lids narrowing as my chatter goes on.

She does not like chatter, so shut up, Rick.

"You're okay, then?"

She nods, turns aside indicating the door, an eyebrow raised in query.

She's inviting me in.

"Oh... that's kind of you, but it's not strictly permitted is it? Out here we're fine. I was just passing. Really."

She gives me a sideways tilt of the head, while one eye probes for deceit, finds none, or at least none that's ill-meant. Her eyes are extraordinary – green with fine speckles of yellow. Then it's hands together, as if in prayer, curious little curtsey. She pulls out her 'phone. She has the government Coronavirus website set as a favourite. I don't blame her. It's impossible to keep up otherwise. She flicks through for the reference, hands it to me.

Mid June now, and the rules have changed again. Singletons like me and her are allowed to form what are being called "bubbles" of mutual support. We can be together, live together, provided we don't go mixing with anyone else, which, speaking for myself isn't likely is it?

I've resisted this in vain. You know I have. And why? I'm lonely for the company of a woman, but Lottie is like a fine-art sculpture made of china, and I don't want to be the one who drops and breaks

her.

Okay, so. Deep sigh. "Would it be all right if I stayed with you a while?"

Her eyes register a little pop of surprise, then she nods. Plain enough. But there's more I need to say, more truth. Only truth works here. Remember how you have to be naked with Lottie? I mean figuratively speaking – okay, physically as well sometimes. So, anyway, I take a breath, pause with my mouth open as if to breathe in the right words, before I speak them.

She gives me another eyebrow. *What is it, Rick? Speak it, man!*

"I would like very much to stay with you for a while. I'd like very much to dance with you, like you said... and get to know you... better,..."

She's listening, detects the rising undertone of a query, detects the "but", meets it head on with her other eyebrow.

"But... I'm afraid of two things. And I don't know which to fear most – one, that I might come to desire you. Because I find you extraordinarily lovely, Lottie. Or two, that you might in some way desire me, because that would be a bit... well... silly."

She sweeps this aside, gestures to the door, smiles, something secret in it. But anyway, I'm inside now and she has linked arms with me, drawn me deep into her bubble, into her heat and scent, while she leads me to the kitchen. If she has the virus, I've got it too, and I don't care. The virus lends our closeness the air of something illicit. Let us die together then, in a pool of sweat and breathlessness.

Then I'm looking out at the garden while she writes something in her talking book.

The grass is overdue, I note. Are the gardeners on furlough? It's a shame to let it go.

Focus, Rick. There is danger here. Remember?

I hear the tapping of the pen on the page bringing me back to reality, and she holds the book open for me to see:

"You must let me teach you not to fear it," she's written.

Ah, but...

"I know you're holding things together here very well Lottie. But I don't know how fragile you are, how easily I could undo all of that. I'm worried I may not be a safe pair of hands. I don't exactly have a good track record."

She blows that one away through pursed lips, flicks the kettle

on, makes tea.

Who am I kidding? If anyone's in danger of getting dropped and broken here, it's me.

Chapter Forty Four

My, how the summer heats up. It's all tragedy, violence and lies. We have sixty three thousand dead, now. In America it is a hundred thousand. There also, a black man is killed by a policeman. The murder is filmed by passers by. Of course, many black men have died at the hands of armed authority there, but this event sets fire to something, a highly combustible thing which, along with the virus, has seeped deep into the cracks of the Zeitgeist.

There have been weeks of riots now. American policemen have come out armoured, like an occupying force. Even the newspapermen, who once cosied up to the powers that be, find themselves bitten by the hands they have served. Now the billy-bats and pepper-spray rains down upon the gentlemen of the press, same as on anyone else, and they stand back shocked.

There have been riots in British cities too. The statue of a slave-trader was tipped into the harbour at Bristol. This was a man whose business in the long ago saw fit to brand the chests of women and children, as if they were cattle – well not him personally, I suppose, but on his say so. Other statues, symbols of Britain's questionable past are vandalised in belated outrage.

All countries have their shadows, and it's dangerous not to own them of course, but I see another danger here. The left is becoming unfocused. It is losing its will for power, and instead channelling a myriad neuroses that are intent, it seems, on breaking through from the bedrock of soul, but the effort dissolves into a kind of chaotic despair. Meanwhile the rich wrap themselves in the safe, simplistic order of flags, enforced by thuggery.

Is that where this is going, Rick?

God help us!

In contrast, the world within Lottie's walls remains serene, and therefore weird. She has shown me a Tuxedo and dancing shoes she has bought, after gleaning my measurements during my last visit. This took only a surreptitious glance at my shoe-size, and an astute guess at my medium-ness. Of course, I do not fool myself into thinking I am the only man she has dressed up and entertained here. She has a way of making you feel special, though. She makes you feel like the man who is different than all the rest, and for whom she will one day speak your name.

I know, I know... she is not broken, does not need repairing, and above all you must not expect she will ever speak your name. But is even my vague understanding of her, and the sense of security it brings, not it's own danger?

I wonder how she chooses her men.

I wonder how they are disposed of.

"That's a fine Tux, Lottie. I can't wait to see your dress."

She has strung twinkle-lights from the trees in readiness for dancing, but for now it rains, for days and days, a hot, heavy rain that comes on thundery in the afternoons, then lasts all night. It saturates the earth and raises a soporific steam in the mornings.

Between the rains, I have mown her grass. And I have paced the length and the breadth of her garden, tracing the lines of the walls that enclose it. I am a sentry checking the defences, making sure the outer world cannot intrude. Beyond are meadows and trees, but much of England is fallow now, its farmland vulnerable to exploitation by spivs who would throw up houses. I imagine them rising above the garden wall here, windows like eyes come to pry, come to obliterate Lottie's serene privacy. It would be a tragedy.

No, I know that's not a very socialist outlook. Others of my kin have been robbed of everything, own nothing, let alone their own privacy. Perhaps then these days, I am no longer a socialist – or perhaps only of the so called Cappuccino variety.

Interesting Rick. Are you changing colour from red to blue? Or more likely something between, like Magenta, perhaps, the colour that does not exist, the one the brain makes up to fill in a logical gap? How appropriate...

I step back from that particular abyss, admire her garden, the soft sweep of it, the careful details of trellis and framed mirrors, and Terracotta. It's a pretty garden, mostly perennials, and just now coming into splashes of colour. Then there are mature trees, chosen for blossom and texture. And a wind-chime, and birdsong.

One cannot resist change, by hiding from it here.

Not for long, anyway.

Is that what you're doing?

Far beyond these walls, there are riots, and Covid, and people without work, or space, people without food, or homes. These are all the old injustices and more – more every day now, an exponential growth of want. And there is nothing I can do about any it.

Molly was right. We did okay, my generation. But we were definitely the last – last of the comprehensively-educated, free-university, final-salaried pensioners. Now all is precarious, and the kids have no future they can see or work towards. There is only uncertainty into old age, and monumental debt pressed upon their backs by a system that gave them no choice. What do we *do* about that?

It's not my fight. It's not my world. I urged them to go out and vote. And they did. They just voted against their own interests. So what am I for, now? What is the meaning of my being in time now, when the times have rejected my efforts?

Is that the right way to think about things, Annie? What did you think about, after you'd sold the farm?

Silence.

Annie is not for talking, but I can feel her watching. There is something anxious about her mood. We are on the cusp of revelation, or disaster.

Mornings, Lottie swims early – and nude. She has invited me to join her but, thus far, I have demurred. I'm sure it's only a practical matter, avoiding the need for washing a costume, not something more deeply sensual, and I just need to grow up, to grow into this way of asexuality.

I glimpsed her only briefly, and once. Perhaps she would wear a costume if I swam with her, but I do not want to risk it. Her pool is the most erotically charged place I know, and I prefer it that way.

She dresses before she does her Yoga, though for this she wears a flesh-coloured Lycra one-piece, so from a distance she might as well be nude. On dry days she does it on the lawn, on wet days, under a jasmine-hung awning. I have watched her there while the thunder rumbles far away, summer-stormy, and humid. She has the figure of a much younger woman and seems to hold the world at bay with her stillness.

So as not to disturb her privacy I sleep late – though I suspect she would not notice me during her meditations. She brings me tea when she's done. And then again, more tea when she finds me in her study, where I sometimes write. Or she will beckon me out for coffee, and we will sit in easy chairs on the deck beneath the awning.

Scent of Jasmine.

And Lottie.

Of an evening, she will read. She is reading Kant and Schopenhauer at the moment, has no time for fiction or poetry. She is her own fiction, her own poetry. I ask her if Schopenhauer – who was an early influence of Nietzsche's – is not too bleak. I regret the question. I remember Bazzer asking once, how can you have a conversation with Lottie when every question you put has to be answered with a facial gesture? And I hate it when I ask something that causes her to reach for the talking-book, to write an answer down. It's as if this is something I should know already, or it's idle conversation which has no place within these walls.

"Schopenhauer is misinterpreted," she writes.

I want to ask her about Nietzsche, ask her if she agrees he is no good for me. Her study is walled with books, a library fit for a former librarian. She has philosophy, psychology, mathematics, Zen, Yoga. She knows a lot of stuff, but this knowledge is hers, and she's the wrong person to be asking for explanations to things that puzzle me. The answers I need are more likely to be found, and more simply, merely in her presence – not that it's a question of looking, more of opening oneself and letting her in.

But what does that mean?

What would she do, I mean... if I truly let her inside of me?

While she reads, I sit with the laptop, trying not to tap too loudly. This used to irritate Mel who hated to be in a room and ignored. She saw my role as her entertainer, which, in turn, I found draining. I hover over the blog, still tempted to delete it, then wonder about updating it with some banal commentary on the present situation.

No, Rick, it's run its course, let it stand as a memorial to the past. To the last gasp of the Left.

The world is on fire. Everything we feared is coming to pass. This is bigger than politics. This is something breaking through the fabric of reality. We have to let it burn off, then sift the ashes. count the bodies, boggle at our blood-lust before we can truly move on. It would not be the first time.

This is Schopenhauer's will.

Sometimes I jot down the notes from which this story will one day take its shape. Sometimes I chip away at the ancestry, seek to conjure Annie's presence in more substantial form – because I miss her suddenly. I am curious about her trip to England in 1960. She remains aloof though. And perhaps she's right. There is nothing in

the record worth pursuing there, unless... unless I stop chasing things backwards in time... and find the courage to move forward a bit.

How easy we are together. Lottie and I.

What could possibly spoil this?

Only you, Rick.

So, who was Rose Monroe?

She was Ewan's daughter. Ewan was Annie's son, remember? Her son with Charlie, lost in the war.

Rose was Annie's grand-daughter.

So, what became of Rose?

The search will probably take me back to Ulverston. But that's fine. Ulverston is a safe enough distance away. If there are distant cousins there, I am not likely to run into any of them, am I?

Why does Lottie want me in a Tuxedo?

The question is out before I've thought about it. She smiles, unembarrassed. Finds a picture on her phone of Fred Astaire, and Ginger Rogers.

"Ah... well, I'll do my best, Lottie, but I'm hardly in that league. You, however, you could hold your own with Ginger any day."

She purses her lips, blows it away, finds me a picture of Bogart in Casablanca.

"Ha! If only..."

She smiles with her eyes, returns to her book. She has a sense of humour, but entertains it deep within herself. Otherwise she gives very little away.

More questions: internal ones:

Is the Drinkhouse all right now? Has the smoke cleared?

It must have – it's been weeks, Rick.

But I really don't care if I never see that lonely old place again.

Is it then the place or the loneliness you abhor?

I think we both know the answer to that.

Sudden decision. It comes to me in flash, a positive awakening: "If it's all right, Lottie, I will swim with you in the morning."

She nods. Yes. Of course that's all right.

"You swim... without clothes?"

Nods. Shrugs. What's the problem?

Okay... no more questions, Rick. You will swim without clothes, and you won't feel guilty about enjoying the sensuality of it. As for the sexuality, just... don't think about it.

Hints from ancestry. Green leaves on the tree of family. On a whim, I click them.

Rose Monroe. Born Ulverston, 1940. She marries Henry Derbyshire, in Lancaster, 1960. She was what? Twenty? He was in his forties!

1960? Okay, it clears that particular mystery up then. Annie came to England for the wedding of her granddaughter.

Another hint from Ancestry: Derbyshire? Henry Derbyshire and Rose Monroe. Daughter, born...

May 20th, 1966. Name... Charlotte. Charlotte Derbyshire. I know that name. "Friend to Molly's daughter, in the long ago?" said Molly. She did say Derbyshire. Right? Which means:

Lottie?

The world tilts. I try to recover myself, try to hide a certain giddiness while I think about this some more. But Lottie has felt it in me and is looking, eyebrow raised.

Are you all right, Rick?

"Em..."

You can't hide this, Rick. You're visibly shaking. So speak it. "Your mum was called Rose?"

How do I know this for sure? I mean, *for sure*, Rick!

Because as ridiculous as it sounds, nothing else makes sense. Obviously.

Lottie nods.

It's true then.

"You father was Henry."

Nods.

"Your grandfather, Ewan, was killed in the second war."

Now she's looking strangely at me, eyes narrowing, even a little afraid, as I am, as our imagined connection unravels. Unravels? Well how else do you describe it? We are unravelling and must be rewound now in a different direction.

"Your great grandmother, Annie, she had a farm in Western Australia. A sheep station."

Yes, yes... she knows this. But how do I know this?

Explain yourself, Rick.

"Annie was my great aunt. I've been researching her life for years. She's just this minute led me right back to you. But Lottie... this makes us..."

I am calculating on my fingers, but the app is already telling me.

We are second cousins. There is a story here. And I will have to tell it to her, or write it down. Yes... yes. I shall write it for her, but for now all I'm thinking is, *is it all right for second-cousins to swim naked together?*

Lottie too is calculating. She jots something down, holds it up for me.

"Kissing cousins then?"

I laugh, something nervous in it. I suppose so. It's not compulsory though.

The kissing, I mean.

Chapter Forty Five

Life doesn't always make sense if you measure it in a straight line. I mean, if you take it one event after the other. Sometimes, you remember a thing from the past, but which made no sense at the time. Then it springs fresh into memory, decades later – only now it's become a key, unlocking the door on a present conundrum.

How to explain?

As a metrologist, one measures the length and the breadth of the physical world. But first we ask how accurate the measurement need be, because this determines the method. On the one hand, we have the experienced machinist who can judge accurately to a tenth of a millimetre by no more than the feel of his callipers. On the other, we use lasers and an elaborate set-up to get to within a nanometre of reality. But that's still a long way from measuring the diameter of an atom.

At the edges of atoms, the world becomes fuzzy. So the question arises, at what point does the world begin and measurement mean anything at all? And for measurement, I suppose you can read truth, or logic – that something is either true or false, that it is either there or not. Except, in the fuzziness at the edges of the world, truth becomes foggy, and its dogged pursuit throws up the phantoms of logical paradoxes. We see their metaphorical traces in our language, things like:

The following statement is true: the previous statement is false.

What does such a thing say about the world? Something? Nothing?

It's nineteen ninety-six when I first ponder these questions. I am speaking at a conference at Manchester's Metropolitan University, a conference I'd forgotten until Molly mentioned it that time on the hill at Holcombe. I am given half an hour on interferometry and she has insisted not a minute more, or the microphone will be cut. She was always a bit of a ball-breaker, Molly – good looking in those days, brassy.

My talk feels elementary though, me this measurer of things. I can hear my own words as I speak them – never a good sign. The reason for my self consciousness? I have followed an ancient, white-bearded scientist from the CERN laboratories in Geneva. He has spoken about experiments studying the entanglement of particles of

light. These studies have suggested there is no world at all until we come to measure it.

An other-worldly, wizard of a man, his talk garnered few questions, but then it's rather a difficult subject for the audience to get a handle on. Most are from the junior ranks of the nation's industrial base. Some are only there for the lunch, paid for by their employers. Others are there to raise a career-profile by scoring clever points off the speakers. The speakers themselves are there because their employers want to raise their profiles too. In this ambiguous context the subject is irrelevant, and few will remember anything of the day, or of him, or of me. Even by tomorrow all will be gone, in my case for decades, when the memory will rise unbidden.

At lunch, I find the wizard sitting alone with a cup of tea. No one is talking to him. The only seats free in the bustling conference hall where suits jostle are those on either side of him. His intellect is felt like a force of nature, repelling interlopers. He does not mean this. He's a loner and can't help it. Neither can I. We have that in common at least.

"There's me," I begin. "All this time measuring things... I mean the millimetres of them, chasing their ever decreasing fractions. And all along, not realising they only come into existence when I decide to measure them."

A joke.

Success. He smiles. He's human.

"What does that tell us about the nature of the world?" I ask him.

He thinks for a while, shakes his head. "Oh, I'm just a physicist," he says. "At times, I'm at a loss. These are ultimately philosophical questions."

We seem, both of us, at a remove from reality now. '96 was a bad year for the IRA bombings. It was also the year of the Dunblane shooting, which caused many of us to question the nature of existence. Life seemed violent, pointless, our survival arbitrary, a question of statistics, pretty much the same as it does now.

Since I was a lad, I have had no room for God, looked at the world early on and decided it was people who made the difference between heaven and hell. Obviously, it was better to aim for heaven, but it was looking like you could never have the one without the other. So, enjoy what you've got while you've got it. I

did not know it then, but I was already groping towards an existentialist outlook, to Nietzsche... and then all those other guys who looked at the horror of the twentieth century. Sure, they came to the only conclusion they could about that.

"Philosophical?" I ask him.

"Is the world really as we materialists claim?" he said. "Or is it more of a Kantian dream?"

I'd no idea who Kant was. Philosopher, I suppose. "Dream? You mean like, it's in our heads?"

"Lord no," he says. "Not in yours. Not in mine. The Universe is the dreamer. It dreams everything, including us. Shocking thought, isn't it? Sounds bizarre. It's also professional suicide to entertain such a notion. But it would explain a lot of what I've seen at the quantum level."

"Like where the world begins?"

"Like how there is no world. At least not in the sense we imagine. Or rather not in the sense we are *capable* of imagining."

I don't know what he means by this, try another joke, try to be clever, when I'm clearly not. "So if the universe is dreaming us... who dreams the universe?"

He didn't answer that one, just smiled politely, finished his tea, excused himself, disappeared into that dense crowd of past encounters. He had perhaps judged from my talk my ability to grasp these concepts was pedestrian at best. I was also hampered by a certain materialist prejudice. I don't remember his name. Molly will have it, and his photograph no doubt. I must ask her about it. Most likely he's dead now, but I would like to have his name.

So how long ago is that then? Thirty-four years, and counting? It's not like I've been carrying the memory around with me. Indeed it seems at times we've no idea what we remember of our experience as we go through life. Right now, I'm watching Lottie swim. And it's while she swims that same stupid question surfaces within me, like a dream breaking. Or rather not so much the question itself as the memory of my asking it.

Who dreams the universe?

I know the answer now, of course. You get older, things change, you become less rigid in your thinking, and the answers creep through. It's in the mood of the morning, in the beauty of it, the beauty of Lottie as she moves in the water.

I'm sorry if all this seems a little bizarre, a little esoteric, but this

is me you're talking to and you should be used to it by now. I mean, here I am sitting, my feet slow cycling in the pool, Lottie swimming and all you want to know is what's she wearing, if anything. And where do things lie between us now? Yet here I'm off on a whole tangential chapter, talking about the fuzziness of atoms.

No one dreams the universe. The universe dreams itself. And it dreams us. That's the miracle of it.

Now...

I know I'm still a materialist at heart, a measurer of the length and the breadth of things, so these concepts are hard for me. But if I *did* believe in magic – and I'm not saying I do – I'd say this: the universe, in dreaming itself, does not know it's dreaming. The whole of life comes dreaming through it, yet the only way it can know anything of itself is through us. We are its eyes and its ears. We are its scouts at the front-line of emergent consciousness, so our reports had better be accurate.

Except they rarely are, are they? Our reports, I mean – accurate, or even truthful – not as we define such things through logic, but as we feel them, in the gut. If we feel a thing, we should be able to articulate it, truthfully. Except we're better at hiding things, aren't we? From others, from ourselves, from the universe itself. It's not always our fault. God knows, sometimes it seems it's the only way we can get along, by not telling the truth. Yet there, that's the root of it, the first step in the loss of all our freedoms to be and to live as we should. To not speak truthfully.

As I watch Lottie swim, I am aware of myself thinking, yet also aware I am not my thoughts. There are two parts of me then. One of them is who I think I am. I have a story, I have all these memories. And then I have this moment, this calm, clear moment, watching her. And in this moment, there arises this awareness of my self and I am wondering if this awareness is the same sense of my self as that looking out through Lottie's eyes, and yours and Al's and everyone else's. Annie's too.

The same silent watcher of all our thoughts.

She surfaces, holds herself against the rail beside me. She's close, like she always is, so close I can feel her breath on my thigh. No escape. Neither of us is wearing anything. There... happy now? So... tell me what that means. You've no idea have you? Neither have I. Neither have either of us said anything about the one thing we have so much to talk about and explore: how we unravelled last

night, then ravelled up again anew, and in some sense inseparable through our connection with Annie Monroe.

All of this has to do with questions and the search for logic in the answers. It has to do with truth, for what is there, and what is not. But here with Lottie, we are at the edges of the world, feeling out the fuzziness of atoms, a place where things can be both true and untrue at the same time.

I am afloat in this, whatever this moment is. And then perhaps its just that I could not help myself, or that it really is the truth, or not the truth, or both at the same time... but I feel a hardening, an unambiguous signalling of desire at her silent presence, though which I qualify with a shrug and a smile of caution... that having stripped bare the male physique, she should be circumspect in the reading of it.

She returns the smile, winks, pushes back, satisfied. Her eyes are closed now, something of a slow-motion rapture about her, arms wide as if to receive blessings, as the water closes over her.

The forecast for this evening is good. We'll be dancing, and I look forward to it.

Anyone who can dance like that... well...

Chapter Forty Six

It's early July when the brakes come off. After being closed for months, the pubs and restaurants open, and those who cannot do without their socialising drag us back towards sporadic pockets of a contagion we have not yet the means, or even the wits to properly contain. The kids go out, pick it up from the bars and the noisy, sweaty places, then bring it home and kill their parents with it.

The toilet paper hoarders of yesterday now sneer at those still cautious, opining with faux wisdom how the whole thing was blown out of proportion, that those who died would have died of old age anyway, that it's harder to catch this bug than was first thought, that keeping two meters apart was unnecessary, that one meter is just fine. One meter opens up a lot of businesses, opens up the high-streets. So, hurry on out now and spend, spend, spend.

But no, I'm not tempted. Especially not when the cost could be a lonely death in an ICU, surrounded by frightened nurses, wearing space-suits. Others must make their own judgement of course, so long as they respect mine.

I prefer to wait for a vaccine.

Lottie stays up late at night, securing deliveries from the supermarkets. She would rather do this than queue to get into a store. I share her caution. Hair-dressers and barber-shops are now open, but I order clippers from eBay, which Lottie uses to tidy up my hair. She lets hers grow long, touches it back to blonde from the first appearances of white.

In our isolation, here in this walled off world, I allow her silence to capture me. And, as we settle into one another, I discover myself speaking less, so that eventually we are able to exchange volumes with a glance, or we can sign it with a sweep of the hand or a pose of fingers.

But we have not slept together. You may find that strange.

Stranger still, we dance.

We dance on Fridays. It grants shape to the weeks. I wear the Tuxedo, which makes me feel rather grand. She wears a variety of movie-star gowns. And only in the dance do we communicate at any personal, physical depth, scoping out the feel of one another. In the Latin there is energy and passion – or as much as I can muster at my age anyway. In the ballroom, there is elegance and a more

restrained eroticism. The dancing makes her smile like nothing else.

Why have we not slept together?

We are both slow types and, unconsciously, we both consider it precipitate perhaps, or even unnecessary. I don't know. Or perhaps we fear it. Sometimes, the dance winds up in a place that seems to demand a kind of animal consummation – the scent of her, the shortness of breath, the beads of sweat descending her neck these humid summer nights. I have watched them, those rivulets of heat and energy, and would surely like to taste her salt. And in her eyes I fancy she knows it, and wills it, but there comes a point where imagination and truth part company, and I dare not test these assumptions for fear of breaking what I see as an otherwise a rare precious thing.

And then there is the swimming.

Our reserve is not on account of the fact we are related. There is no taboo between second cousins. So, as for the erotic, yes... the swimming is exquisite, but far more arousing for me has been the buzz of the clippers as she leaned against my shoulder and ran them languorously over my head. I have wanted to slip my arm around her waist – almost did, too – it had felt so natural, since that is how we dance, but outside of the dance I did not want to frighten her. There are depths and dangers with Lottie I still do not understand.

For the rest there is an easy companionship, and the more banal details of life are never far away, and which provide breathing space. This morning for example, you find me checking through the policy for my house insurance, online of course, while she does her yoga beneath the awning. Road Tax on the Beast must be also paid. MOT inspection was due, but has been put back by six months, so that's all fine. Then there are spam emails: Junk. Junk. Junk. Book a holiday. Book a cruise. Book a weekend. Spend. Spend. Spend.

Get back to normal.

I don't understand.

There can be no normal after this. I felt it the night of the election, back in December, that the rug of normality had been pulled from beneath us. I have adapted to it, now. It leaves me changed, and in ways I had not expected. I do not want to return to normal. This suits me better.

Then as is the way with reverie, a sudden email pings in from Al.

"Hey Rick, the Tints are sounding out for a meeting at the Pear

Tree next Tuesday, at eight. Are you in?"

What? Not bloody likely. Are you insane?

“Rather not Al. It sounds like a good way to catch Covid."

"Supposed to be safe now. The infection rates in our area are low."

"Depends if you trust what you're hearing. Myself, I prefer to err on the side of caution. What do the others think?"

"Mixed opinions. Baz has been in the pub every night since they opened – and no surprises there, I suppose. Molly agrees with you and thinks we should wait. So you think it's a bad idea?"

I hope you're giving Baz a wide berth then. "I'd give it six months before we even think about it."

Wait... Molly agrees with me?

But wait... why is Al emailing me really?

"Okay," she says. "Up to you. How are you anyway? You've been keeping quiet. Email's not the best of mediums for a chat, is it? We left things a bit up in the air last time – my fault I know. I was really pissed with you, but you weren't to blame. It was my fault. I've been ringing but you're never there. Don't you have a mobile? What about Skype?"

Skype? Do I have Skype? I had a spell of using it, thinking to keep in touch with the kids that way, but it wasn't long before they became evasive, changed their addresses. I rummage among the programs on the laptop. Yes, I still have it. I’m nervous about this, not sure I want to see her face, not sure I want to read the language of her body, but I send her the link anyway, leave things to fate. A window pops up on my screen. *Ping-Pong.* Alison calling.

"Hi Al. Forgot I had it. Or we could have used it before."

"Yes, but we didn't know each other back then as well as we do now. So... good to see you, Rick. It’s been a while. Nice haircut by the way. Sorry about mine. It must be a foot longer than when you last saw me. Ooh, nice room! I don't remember that at your place. You've been redecorating? Looks very studious. Have you read all those books or are they just for show?"

Same old Al. Her teasing is a good sign. I like it when she teases me. I can relax into it, find myself laughing at all my petty sensitivities. At times I am all hot air, and she grounds me. "I'm round at Lottie's. This is her study."

Truth. Truth is always the best bet, if you can stomach it, even better if you can't. But what about Al?

She doesn't miss her stride. "Not got you at a bad time have I?"

"Never a bad time for you, Al."

"So... is this a flying visit to Lottie's, or have you moved in?"

"Been here a while. There was a fire at the back of my house one night. The whole plantation nearly went up and the house with it. The smoke was bad for days, and I had to get out. Lottie took pity on me."

The lighting at her end is poor, and it's hard to read her expression, but I think this finally gives her pause. I don't mean it to. Naturally, I might have expected her to ask why I didn't call on her, seeing as how she only lives the other side of the hill. But we'd had a spat of course, and she'd been mixing with Bazzer, so I couldn't be sure of the measure of things – either legally or infection wise...

All of this I feel contained and processed in the momentary silence, and then:

"You're together then?" she asks.

"I suppose yes... in a way."

"I'll let Bazzer know. The mystery's been driving him nuts. No surprises here, anyway, like I've said all along, and about time too, Rick."

Dismissive, testing for the length of rope that links us now. Don't pay it out too long, Al. I still need you.

"We've discovered we're cousins, actually. So... there's no escaping one another, at least in that sense."

She brightens, hauls in some rope, pulls it up taut. "Cousins? Well, that's a turn up?"

"You remember I told you about my great Aunt? I did some digging and found out she was Lottie's great grandmother. Still haven't got over the coincidence."

She squeezes out a smile, makes light. "Oh... well... that's... that means you're second cousins... or something... right? That's cute actually."

"We just dance, and swim, Al."

"Dance?"

"Yes..."

"Okay. That's weird. But you've... what... moved in? Bubbled up?"

"Bubbled up?"

"It's allowed now. You can make a support bubble with another

household – or something. I'm a bit blurry on the details."

This just get weirder. "I guess that's what we've done then. I'll be here a little while. Not sure how long."

"You're not just hiding out, the two of you, are you? I mean things are getting back to normal out here, Rick. Come meet with us at the Pear Tree. Molly's going on about climbing Swirl How – but none of us have been on a mountain in twenty years, and I'm worried. I need you as a voice of common sense. I think we should do something smaller, like maybe Penyghent."

"Yes, Penyghent will give you a better idea of everyone's mountain form. I'll support you on that."

"You'll be at the meeting then? Start getting back to normal, or as near as?..."

"Sorry, Al. I think we'll be into local lock-downs soon, but without contact tracing and testing, and with all the pubs open, it's going to be impossible to contain. This bug's still around."

"But so are a lot of other things, Rick, and any one of them will kill us. Hasn't life always been a balance of risk? We just have to add this one to the list. You should join us. We need you on the hill. Don't end up right back where I found you."

Ooh, that last bit was said with a passion. And where was that then, Al? Where was I exactly? I was injured in battle, betrayed, Robbed of trust. Yes, all of that. In some ways I was just a pair of boots, and I was winter on the hill, a part of me frozen, and my legs aching for want of use.

So, that's fine. We've established that.

But where am I now?

Chapter Forty Seven

High summer, coming up on the dog days, and I'm mowing my own lawn, which has by now somewhat outgrown itself. I have felt safe for such a long time, secure within the boundary of Lottie's walled garden. I emerge feeling unprepared and defensive for what the world might have in store, but also and in a more pragmatic sense that those bits of the world I identify as my own are requiring maintenance.

Banal as it may sound, I've also returned to take delivery of roofing-felt and tacks for my shed. It was leaking and will have rotted away if I leave it another season, let the winter in to ruin the mower and soak the logs for the burner. All for want of a horse-shoe nail, or rather a bit of felt and a box of tacks.

They arrived this morning.

That said, I really don't intend being here long. Just the week, no more. Fix the roof then back to Lottie, before anything has the chance to intrude and burst that bubble we're in. Of course Al's words echo, and that they echo suggests I am hiding from something...

The sun makes a brief and weary appearance so, I trundle the mower out. I'll tackle the shed tomorrow. For now though, the grass cutting is difficult, exhausting. I lean on the mower, lost in the contemplation of things, while the traffic roars by to catch my breath. I feel strange this morning. It's nothing I can put my finger on. I'm just... not myself.

It's my time with Lottie, I suppose. The strange beauty of it. There's the calmness, yes, but that's enabled something else to come creeping through... and I want nothing more than to see how deep the transformation goes. But after such peace, it's obviously not going to be any easier, ignoring the world's ongoing vexations. Indeed they stand out all the more, refusing the normalisation that creeps up on us. Though in observing them, I also realise there has been a shift in my perception.

It used to be such a quiet road, but everything is different now. The pull-in opposite my place has three vehicles crammed into it. This long Covid Holiday is into its fourth month, and still being enjoyed by those with the money to sustain them, or the means to work from home. For the rest, the furlough schemes are being

tapered back, and redundancies are looming. 65,000 dead, now, or 45,000? Both are given as true. No one is talking about it. But that no one is taking about it has become for me a passing observation on the nature of a changing reality, rather than the subject for an entire blog rant.

Except we were talking about it in the bar last night. Nietzsche was there as usual, taking the piss out of me again for being a lefty. So I told him I was not a Communist, nor a Marxist, that most of those who said they were these days had no idea what they were talking about, that it was merely trendy, that they were obviously overlooking the horrors of the twentieth century and the Gulag.

I told him I was sick to death of having the 'C' word thrown at me just because, in the struggle between capital and labour, I've always been on the side of labour. I mean, what? Does he approve of homelessness and soup kitchens while the rich play around in gold plated motor-cars? He sneered at that, told me to grow up, so I called him an egomaniacal twat, which gave him pause, but I think he approved.

Then I said I was out anyway. Let others fight that battle. And there was a feeling I meant it.

"I'm done, man," I told him, to which he replied I was a chicken-shit coward, and I wanted to punch him.

A lot of people were shouting, including me. No one had a clue what they were talking about, all of us just angry old men, shaking our fists at the moon. Great uncle Charlie bought me a drink, told me to calm down and take no notice of any of them. He told me he'd had a fever, out in Mesopotamia, that he was hallucinating all of this, and he hoped I wouldn't catch it from him – the flu, he meant. I said I knew, and that I'd be okay.

I'd be just a week, I told Lottie, back on Friday evening, to dance. I would not miss the dancing for anything. And in the morning we would swim.

Hell, the grass seems thicker than ever, the mower sluggish and lacking power. It takes the whole morning and the effort leaves me exhausted. I contemplate the leaking shed now, the rolls of pristine felt and the shiny new tacks, and feel crushed of a sudden. Maybe give it a few days. I'm obviously out of condition. Age catching up.

After mowing, my throat feels raw. By evening it has developed into a dry, chesty cough. Then I pass a rough night, sleepless, hacking away, and am further disturbed by stomach pains, and a

headache. In the morning I rise groggy, joints aching, blisters over my eyelids. Then I get the shivers, then the runs, and my sense of smell is gone, and though it's a gloomy day with a dense clag over the moors, I cannot stand the light. It burns my eyes.

I consult Doctor Google, which points me to the NHS website, whose Q + A tells me I've probably got Covid.

Shit.

I don't know where I picked it up from. It can't be from Lottie. I last saw her five days ago, and she's seen no one in months. I read that the symptoms take, on average, five days to show up, which rather implicates the Grindleton stores where I called for supplies on my way home from Lottie's. I remember too an unclean old guy without a mask, coughing his guts up, asking for twenty fags, and a bottle of raggedy-arsed whiskey. Maybe I touched the door in the same place as him, then touched my face, and the damned thing got in through my mouth or my eyes.

Really? As simple as that?

My first thought is to let Lottie know I shall have to isolate for two weeks, and that I'm sorry. *And I really am desperately sorry*. The second thought is: how bad will I get it, and am I going to die? And if I don't die, is it going to leave me damaged in some way?

The media coverage of this thing is sensational and grim. I assume the worst, but feel so rough I actually don't care if I live or die, which I'm told is nature's way. Before I succumb, I plug the laptop and the telephone in by the bed, so I can maintain contact with the outside world, but the effort exhausts me.

Okay, so... bright side, Rick, you may be pushing sixty, but you're fit and well fed, so hold to that thought. You'll most likely get away with a mild dose. I mean, look, you've rarely had a day sick off work in your life. All right, fine. But then I feel an iron band tightening around my chest, shortening the breath, squeezing the life out of me, and I start to fear, if not death itself, then dying in pain. Because no one wants to die in pain, right?

I take a thousand milligrams of Paracetamol, and crawl into bed. I hear notifications pinging to the lap-top. It's Lottie maybe, but I'm unable to check, let alone reply.

There are knives sticking out of my head.

Chapter Forty Eight

I've read it causes weird dreams. But then I've read Covid lock-down causes those too, and I suppose it's just that I've always enjoyed my dreams that the weirdness seems natural to me. It doesn't jar my brain that things don't follow a logical sequence. I can flow with them, but the Covid seems to have lent an increased sharpness of vision to all of that, so while I sleep it truly is like being alive in another dimension of reality.

Just now I'm on the wide open porch of Annie's bungalow, sitting in a rocker, looking out at an infinity of green hills. Sheep graze in tight flocks like murmurations of birds. I wonder if this place still exists, I mean in reality. Maybe Lottie and I should come out and see if we can find it, when this damned Covid thing is over.

Annie is in the rocker beside me. "Buck up, mate," she says. "You're not going to die."

"You don't reckon?"

"Nah."

Why am I here then? What am I thinking? What question is uppermost in my mind right now? So ask it of the dream, of Annie: "I don't know what to do, Annie. Don't know what to do about Lottie. I mean where she fits in the puzzle of my life."

"What makes you think it's up to you?"

Okay, so that's me told.

"Shed roof needs felting. I'll be weeks getting over this. And then the bad weather will hit... and... everything will be spoiled."

"So ask for help," says Annie. "You've got friends."

But surely, she only says this because she knows I don't. I have lots of women in my life, sure, but no one I can ask to help me felt a shed roof – no gender discrimination intended. The actual problem is trivial anyway, so I don't know why it's popping up here, except as a metaphor. The shed roof is leaking. I am leaking. Stuff inside of me is at risk of spoiling. I need to work on myself.

Nothing new there then.

Annie laughs. "Poor, Rick."

"Poor nothing. I found Lottie for you didn't I? Isn't that what you wanted? Isn't that why you've haunted me all these years?"

"Fair enough. Good comeback. But you didn't find her for me. I knew where she was. I led you to her."

"Okay, touché. But why?"

"Closes a loop, Richard. Leaves me at peace. Joins my story back to the place I came from. I didn't do too bad for myself out here. But the stories run deep in us sometimes. And I see a lot of myself in Lottie." And then: "Funny isn't it. Lottie being my nearest living blood. Next to her it's you. Took a while for the money to find her. Caught up with her just in time, I'd say. And you didn't need it."

She rises then, puts on a straw hat, slides a pin through it. I've a feeling I'll never see her again.

"Wait..."

"Rest a while. I'll send someone round to look in on you in a bit."

"No, wait... wait..."

She waits. *What is it Rick?*

"What's the matter with me?"

And I don't mean the damned Covid.

"You're a warrior, mate. But you're tired. And you've been up to your knees in shit, and your sword's blunt from swinging it against a brick wall."

"But... Lottie..."

"Oh... that's a whole lot easier than you're making out Rick. Just ask yourself: is she good for you or not? As for the other way round, like I said, what makes you think that's up to you."

She blows a kiss, and then she's gone.

Morning, and it feels like I'm lying in a pool of sweat. I'm weak and raw, but clearly not dead. I have sufficient energy to reel the dream back, punch it feebly into the laptop, a mess of typos swimming in double vision. The software underlines them angrily.

All right, all right, you pedantic bastard. Just cut me some slack, will you?

Suddenly I'm hung up on what seemed a passing aside about money. But there are no asides in dreams. That meant something. Lottie inherited. Her place... it didn't come out of winning on the Euromillions. I came out of the plains of Western Australia, and a pioneering woman called Annie Monroe.

Before I can think this through, see if it makes sense, there's a banging on the door. I don't care who it is, I can't lift myself from bed. They'll get the idea eventually and go away.

"Hey, Mick?"

Someone's thumping up the stairs.

"Door was open, mate. Either you're not scared of thieves or

you've nothin' worth nickin', you miserable old bastard. You okay? It's me, Baz. You dead or dyin, or what?"

I didn't lock the door. Now Bazzer is in my house?

"You'd best keep away, Baz. Seriously. I think I've got it."

"Got what? It's them dirty women. I warned you about that. Need to keep your dick in your pants, mate." He's in the room. "Shit, Mick. You look a state. But at least you're not dead."

"I said, I think I've got..."

"Yea, yea... me too. Had it weeks ago. Probably got it from a dirty glass at the Dog and Gun. I'll not get it again. Not that I want it, mind. Fuck me, that were a nasty bug, for sure."

"You tested positive?"

"Test? Nah, good luck getting a test, mate, let alone getting some results back."

"I thought they were tracking and tracing... how else are we going to?..."

He laughs. "What planet are you on? We'll all get it eventually. It's just a toss up if it'll kill you or not. Anyway, I'll tell the girls you've not croaked, okay?"

"Girls?"

"Lottie sent a text to Al, so Al rang me. She says go check on Mick. She hasn't spoken to me as nicely as that in months. So here I am, like a shot, mate. Anything for a few brownie points there. Fancy a brew? You'll be days on wobbly legs, but it looks like you'll be reet. Fair nearly shit me brains out too, so best just to keep your fluids up for now, then a bit of soup with no bits in or you'll be shittin' them all week un all. So how about it?

"How about what?"

"Brew, you dozy bugger."

Yes indeed, a brew would be most welcome.

While Bazzer clatters about in the kitchen, I ease myself downstairs, unable to trust him not to break anything. Everything is spinning, and I would have been better staying in bed, but there's something about having Bazzer in my house I find unsettling. I've been protecting myself from people like him all my life.

And why is that, Rick?

Well, they're so damned pushy, so in your face, you're going to have to say "no" to them, all the time. But they don't listen, and that's as well, because you need them. So try to say "yes" occasionally, because that way you might feel better, and learn

something in the process.

Am I still dreaming perhaps? There are those dreams where you think you've woken up and you've not. You're actually still dreaming.

I stub my toe on the door-frame, swear. Not dreaming then. He makes tea with about ten sugars in it. I normally don't take any, so this hits me like a shot in the arm, but it bucks me up a little. I gather breath and steam.

"Thanks, Baz."

"If in doubt have a brew, eh? Nice old place you've got here, mate. Always looks a bit grim from the outside though, if you don't mind my sayin'."

"Most people think that. It used to be a pub. My grandfather would drink here."

"Family's from round these parts then?"

"My mum."

"And that old soldier of yours?"

"Yes... him too."

"Well... I'll not tire you out. I'll just sup up and go. Girls will be happy you're on the mend, though you've managed to piss Al off nearly as much as I have, and that's really saying something. Wouldn't want to piss Lottie off though. Fuck knows what she'd do to you." He shudders. "Best not thinking about that one."

"Well, thanks... Baz."

"Got enough food in?"

Enough for months. I nod.

"Listen," he says. "I'm sorry... like... I mean if I spoiled things with you and Al. We weren't up to anything, that time you called, like. I were just passin'. Dropped in for a chat... like."

How much does he know? Did she tell him we slept together?

"I'm not sure there ever was a me and Al, Baz... not in the sense I think you mean. And if there was, it wasn't you that spoiled it. It was me. Anyway you did say I was okay to give it a go..."

"Yea, yea,... I know. I was worried about her. She's no good on her own. She thinks she is, but she's not. She needs someone to growl at or she'll go mad. That's why I went round that time, just after lock-down. Me and her... it's complicated, and maybe we were never any good together. Plus, I'm sure she hates the sight of me."

This is starting to feel a little weird, but then I'm not well.

"She doesn't hate you all the time, I'm sure."

"Aye well... 'appen not *all* the time."

We drink tea, change the subject to walking and the moors, and the upcoming expedition of the Tints up Swirl How. He's excited at the prospect – no date for it yet, as such. But from what I've read about Long Covid, I might be months just working up the steam to get up Black hill again.

"Al's not going for a dry run on Penyghent, then?"

"Nah... no need for that. Swirl How's nothing. Easy, mate."

I'm not going to debate this. The last time I was up Swirl How I was caught in an ice storm, without crampons. I made it down on my arse, one inch at a time. I was twenty five, back in work the next day, laughing about it. I was lucky. It didn't dent my confidence much then, but people age more quickly than mountains do, and I suppose what I'm afraid of is a return match, because my legs aren't as tough as they were, and next time I'd surely lose.

Right now, I just want to go back to bed. Baz knows it, nods, drinks up, makes to leave. Then he thinks a while. "Got to say this one thing, Mick. I know you'll likely take it the wrong way, and I don't want you to."

"Oh?"

"I clocked you right from the start. Remember? That piss-wet afternoon up by the memorial? You carry yourself like an officer. Yes, you do. Officers think they're better than anyone else. And fair enough, you're a smart bloke. That's what officers are like. But a real officer – dyed in the wool type – they believe it too, like Al does. She believes in herself, so you believe in her, and that's why you follow people like that, whether they know anything or not. That's why she's walk-leader for the Tints. Right? But you? You don't mean it. You're cleverer than most of the officers I've served under – a lot of them were thick as pig-shit, actually – but you've not the confidence to carry it off, see? You doubt yourself, and it shows. Not saying that's a bad thing. Just that it shows, right?

"Me? I know what I am, and sometimes that's not great. Al says so, and she right. And, I fucked it up with her, for sure, and not the first time either. But from the sounds of it you didn't make any better job of it, which makes me feel a bit better about me-self. Anyway, I'll leave me number on the way out. Ring me if you want owt. I'll call and have another look at you in a couple of days. Wipes you out this bug, see? So you'll likely want to just lie there, and 'appen starve to death."

I think I'm better than anyone else, but I've not the confidence to

carry it off?

Cheeky bastard.

"I suppose what I'm trying to say is just have the confidence to be yourself, Mick."

"Myself?"

Like he'd know. I mean... this guy who can't even get my name right.

But that I feel piqued by it, and as usual by him, tells me he might be onto something.

Chapter Forty Nine

Weeks pass in a no-man's land, oscillating between glimmers of recovery, then relapses into an abject fatigue. Some mornings I rise thinking I'm ready for the moors, but am drained to a tearful irritability by the time I've dressed. It is unlike any other sickness I have known – both alien and yet horribly familiar, like a deep wound inflicted by one's own mother. Meanwhile, the weather sinks to grey, and the house clings like sack-cloth, all scratchy and unsettling.

I'm missing Lottie. I'm missing Al.

The tears puzzle me. I'm clearly not dying. I will recover, though it comes as no surprise to me so many have not, and will not, and many of those who do will never be the same again.

I never knew what I expected of my life, only that this was not it. I am not crying for what once was, more for what I imagine can not now ever be. I mean, even if I knew what that was. All right. I *do* know. Of course I know: Family. Wife, My kids... maybe even grandkids. All of us still together, or at least communicating, from wherever in the world we fetched up. And me and Mel drifting into the autumn of our lives, gazing out from the promenade at Southport with coffee and sandwiches...

But she's gone... they've all gone, spirited away by a big lie, my life polarised like my country has been polarised, and I have yet to find the centre of myself without them. And though I am no longer angry about that, losing the anger is like losing an old friend, and I feel vulnerable without it. Anger is such a good a crutch. It makes you feel like you're doing something, shouting. Without it, we have to find a way of walking properly again, unaided.

Without it we have to fill the void with something else. With truth, maybe.

But truth is hard. It's like walking on water.

Meanwhile, the storm of lies intensifies, becomes bizarre, rages across the Internet, infiltrates my Youtube suggestions, and begets violence on all fronts.

Wearing face-masks is a form of oppression. Vaccination is a means of mind control. Vaccination never saved a single life. Powerful leftists are in cahoots with a global cabal of child sex traffickers. Thermal imaging devices pointed at the forehead to check for Covid are really

guns designed to obliterate the third eye.

That last one is a little subtle for such an otherwise crass age.

Jeeze, good luck countering that lot, A.N.N.I.E.

In my less than rational state it's even harder to know what to make of it, where it's going, what it means, especially now I am deprived of the simplistic response of my own rage. On the greater, transcendent level, I wonder if it's mother nature selecting for a shift in consciousness, that those incapable of operating at a higher level will be picked off in successive waves of contagious stupidity, and if not that, then Covid. If not this pandemic, then the next. We likely have years of this to come, and already I have seen so much I did not think was in us.

As for me, I am seeing magenta again, neither red nor blue, more that peculiar colour, the one that does not exist.

Molly rings to restore a sense of proportion and to ground me in reality. She says she's been looking into the testing procedure for Covid, and has discovered it's too late for me to get a test sent to my home, that I will have to drive to a test site, but only if I can get an invitation. There, a soldier will shove a swab up my nose and down my throat. She revels in the details.

For myself, I'd not thought about getting a test. It’s obvious what I've got, and so long as I keep to myself for a bit, it's no one else's business. Fourteen days is the rule. If you're not dead in that time, it's okay to come out again.

"I'm not driving anywhere, Molly. I'm told you could be sent hundreds of miles for a test, and I'm in no fit condition."

"That's probably sensible, Rick. But you should also inform on anyone you've been in contact with."

"Grass them up, you mean? Yea right. Is that what you'd do?"

"Only those people I don't like."

"And the ones you do like?"

"Hmm... I don't know."

But she’s not ringing to tell me this. "So, how’s Lottie? She must be worried about you? Not seen much of her recently. You?"

Ah, this is more like it. Seen much of her recently? Other than another emailed picture of her, this time in the bath, hair up, soapy suds to cover her modesty, though by now I am perfectly familiar with it – her modesty I mean. She had also a cheeky curl to her lips, and a twinkle in her eye, as if to invite me in. but I’m not about to tell Molly that. "Em... fine last time I saw her. I’m sure Lottie’s

being very careful, isolating."

I will teach you not to fear it.

Fear her desiring me, or me desiring her?

"That's the introvert for you. Make a good pair, you and her..."

"We're just friends."

"A swift denial, Rick. Friends like we are?"

I imagine Molly sending me a picture of herself in the bath, am intrigued by the frisson. "Em... no, not like we are, Molly."

"You mean you fancy her but you don't fancy me."

I'm flagging now. Molly rambles on a bit, tells me more of her plans for town councillor. But such talk leaves me cold. Eventually she picks up on my fatigue, and says she'll let me go. She will ring again in a few days. I did not know any of these people a year ago, yet now they are the centre of me. Or rather I am at the centre of them, as they circle and make me dizzy.

Another email: Chester passed away last night. Message from his family: the funeral will be next week, and am I able to attend? Funerals are permitted now, mourners are strictly limited in number though, and socially distanced of course. Wakes are banned. This comes as shock, though it should not. It was not the bug that took him.

Regret I am unable to attend. Have Covid.

I would not have found that easy, anyway. Chester was the only one who knew what I was without my having to explain it to anyone else. And nowadays I haven't the breath for it. *No... I'm a metrologist, not a meteorologist.*

And with Chester's going, I lose my only witness to the earlier and perhaps the most substantial part of me. And with that again, the question: what am I now?

What the hell am I for, Annie? No longer a political activist, no longer a working man.

You were a measurer of things for a long time, Rick. But that's not the only thing you were, not the only thing you aspired to.

Before I can close the laptop, a local news snippet pops up: police have raided the homes of several political activists in the North West. No names are given. The write up sounds like they've broken up a neo-Nazi cell, or something, but then describes the suspects as faculty members and former students at the university. Online offences. Hacking. Cyber-stuff. Bot factory.

They're rounding up Lefties?

Rachel?

Does that mean they're going after A.N.N.I.E? My node is not transmitting still, and hasn't been for a while. She is mute, still languishing in a bag of dirty washing on the back seat of the Beast.

Bastards. Let them come for me.

With luck I am still infectious.

Chapter Fifty

I give it the statutory fourteen days isolation and then pay for a damned test. I get the all clear, same way money buys you anything, except love, and meaning. I also learn I am blessed with antibodies, but that they won't last long, and therefore be of much use if I'm exposed to it again. This is a cunning bug for sure, and one wonders how we shall ever be rid of it.

As for the rules, not much change that I'm aware of: keep away from those you love, go sit cheek by jowl in a pub with beery-faced strangers instead. And strange as they are, these are the rules, no matter which way I cut them, a balance between saving lives and saving the economy, such as it is. But such as it is, the economy is winning and infection rates are rising again.

Bazzer rings to see if I'm okay. I tell him I'm mending, which does indeed seem to be the case. I ask him if he knows anyone who can felt my shed roof. I fear a day up a ladder nailing felt would set my recovery back, so have decided to delegate. He comes round next morning with a toothless old mate of his called Joey Snake, and the two of them have the shed-roof sorted by lunchtime. Since they won't take money, I promise them some beers, next time I'm at the Grindleton Stores, but not to tell Al, or we would all be in the dog-house.

From his expression I gather Baz already is. Again.

Then he rallies, and tells me the store is shut after somehow infecting half the village, and haven't I heard? The owner had the habit of picking his nose and leaving traces of gunk all over the merchandise. I don't know if this is true, or if it's just Baz being Baz. People are in intensive care, but we laugh anyway because the times demand it.

Joey tells me he was born on a farm on the moors, that it's gone now but for a square of stones in the grass in the lee of Black hill, and do I know it? I tell him I do. This pleases him, as if my taking note of it confirms the validity of his own past, his own memories, that we need others to validate our existence, otherwise we're cast into a sterile solipsism.

He tells me to take care. I am touched by it, as I am by his story.

During certain periods of our lives our own light goes out, but it can be reignited by the spark of another person. Each of us has

reason to feel a deep gratitude for those who reignite the flame in us. Al, Lottie, Baz,... even a passing but charismatic face like Joey Snake. But of those persons to be grateful for it's anyone really, anyone who takes an interest, and you're willing to let them in.

I check out the shed. Bits of it are rotten, but the roof's like new again and will outlast the rest. The mower, and logs for the burner are safe for another few bleak winters up here.

That suspiciously loitering SUV hasn't been around for a while, but I trust the telephone lines even less now. This isn't paranoia, it's merely a sensible precaution under the circumstances, and the times we're living in. I'm still thinking about A.N.N.I.E, but I've no means of contacting Rachel, so no way of confirming what's going on with her, or if she needs my help. She has my address so, I suppose, thinking logically, while at the same time stating the obvious, she's either okay, or she's not. But if she's not, she's not informed on me, or they'd already have beaten down my door.

There's no further news about what happened with the arrests, or who copped it, and I dare not dig for details in case someone is scrutinising my searches. But anyway, I dismantle the laptop that is A.N.N.I.E, burrow down through the fine screws to the hard drive, this being the bit where A.N.N.I.E lives. The rest is just dead hardware, and therefore non-compromising. I wrap it in several layers of cling film, put it in a little box, along with stones, and wrap the whole lot again in cling film. Then I take an evening constitutional over the moor, towards the sunset, towards Black hill, towards Al, and I sink the package in the bog not far from Joey Snake's old place, the same bog where Bazzer once downed a drone.

There's a definite touch of autumn in the air, the bog water freezing in its peaty filth as I plunge A.N.N.I.E elbow deep into the dark, and to a far future when someone discovers her, then rummages among the museum tech, and plugs her back in – always assuming anyone survives these successive waves of pandemic, the coming climate catastrophe, and nuclear re-armament. She seems an emblem of the crazy times we live in now, and while I did not want to be caught red-handed with the thing, I did not want the memory of our resistance to die altogether either.

The short walk has exhausted me. The light is going, and my eyes are blurring as I come back down to the road, the shadows losing their detail, so I do not see the figure slumped in the doorway until I am putting my key in the door.

Rachel!

Chapter Fifty One

To have Rachel in my house is against the law. At least I think it is, but the law is complicated now and changes, every day, so no one is taking any notice of it.

She's dressed for the hill, except for the trainers, which are busted out and soaking. I was always telling her off her for those trainers – at least to the extent that I dared. Everyone who is not a walker always skimps on their footwear, then wonders why they fall apart when they leave the pavement. She has walked from Manchester, thirty miles, slept last night in the lee of a drystone wall up by Affetside – a considerable feat of evasion, to say nothing of navigation. She used online maps, of course, but I note her phone is, as usual, a battered and untraceable burner.

Her hands are wrapped around a mug of sugary tea as she tells me about her journey, and she cannot disguise the tremor in them. She is heading for Hull, and from there a boat to Rotterdam. She has friends, academic connections, with the universities of Eindhoven and Dortmund. I deliberately do not ask if there is a warrant out for her arrest and she deliberately does not confirm or deny it. But whatever the case, she will probably be safe there from UK enquiry, especially given the dire state of the BREXIT negotiations right now.

She cannot walk to Hull, so can I help?

Of course I can.

She looks pale and ill. I wish she would stay a while, build her strength, though seeing her up close this way, like I used to know her, is shocking. It's reminding me of the way things used to be, not just between us, but also with me in the days I knew and shared with her. Those days were angry, driven, hopeful for change. Now they are none of those things. As for the drive, and the hope for change,... well maybe I was hoping for the wrong kind of change, or looking for it in the wrong places.

What she needs most right now is the sense of having gone to earth, somewhere to catch her breath, to lay her head and rest.

"You look like you could do with a hot bath and some sleep."

She nods. "Is that okay?"

"Of course it is."

One bed and no spare, remember? You're going to have to do

something about that, mate – too many empty rooms in this house. Either you must fill them, or move out. But in the meantime you have no choice but to procrastinate. Which I suppose, is why I'm at the computer still, at midnight, while she's abed. Your bed. She is either sleeping or waiting.

I have ordered her fresh boots and socks and a better jacket than the one she was wearing, and I have paid for next day delivery. Some poor kid in a warehouse is now dashing around on aching feet while a clock ticks down. Yes, we have each become our brother's oppressor. Don't go there Rick. I know you're tempted, but really, nobody cares.

Now my fingers are hovering over the blog again, like they have a thousand times already. Delete the stupid thing, or vent my spleen one last, venture perhaps into Covid territory – rich ground for spleen venting...

But no one is listening. And anyway, we are where we are.

Let's see, what we had to say in the past:

I scroll back to 2015, a lifetime ago, writing against a tide that would destroy all fellowship, all union, make a foreign place of the European cities I have loved. The few comments wished me death, testament to the wrong kind of attention, but these too seem quaint in their antiquity.

2016 now, and the brief resurgence of the Left, then 2019, and I'm stuffing envelopes at CLP HQ, then leafleting in the dawn light of that cold winter, door-knocking, politely soaking up the spittle flecked abuse. Was that really only last year? Then it was election night, and the realisation of how firm the mould was set.

The door opens and Rachel leans in, bleary eyed against the frame, wearing an old shirt of mine. She always did look a picture that way, long legs and all so lovingly remembered.

"I heard voices," she says.

"Oh... that. It's just the wind. This is an old house."

"No, it was definitely voices. Sounded like a row going on."

"Yea, that would be Nietzsche. Never could hold his drink. Maybe a few farm hands too, and my great uncle Charlie, of course. Great peace maker, my great uncle Charlie."

"What?"

I smile at that. If Rachel ever did have a sense of humour, it's buried so deep, she no longer knows its there. She has spent too long shouting from the barricades, I suppose, and facing down one

damned tyranny after the other.

"Just the wind, Rachel. Really."

She thinks for a while, shakes her head clear. "Do you still have A.N.N.I.E?"

"Got rid of it when I heard about the arrests."

"Best thing," she says. "Sorry I dragged you into that."

"No, it was a good idea. A brave idea. Creative. It just needed a little time... I suppose."

"They picked up on it straight away, came down hard."

I remember seeing her at a conference, an unlikely combination of measurement and psychology – more of an excuse for networking and lunch for tech experts than anything else. We'd met before though, at a Party conference, and remembered one another. We were in the mood for distant familiars, and hit it off. I was living alone by then, found the house unpleasant in its emptiness, so went home with her for a while. It sounds like a desperate, middle aged thing to do, but she was good for me.

But I realise now, I was never an ideologue. Not then, not now. As for Rachel, so far as I can tell, it was simply in her blood.

I'd like to think at some future time, I'll be cheering her on again. But the least I can do right now is give her a bed for the night and drive her to Hull.

"What are you writing?" she asks.

"Just some stuff about walking." I lie.

Forgive me Lottie.

She gives a knowing nod. "These new trespass laws? Glad you're on top of that. That's looking pretty serious..."

Perhaps so, but it's the least of our problems, Rachel. "No... it's just routes and reminiscences, and stuff."

This sounds weak to her, I know, but to me potentially more useful than anything else I've ever written, so I might actually consider doing it. You know? Point some other poor disillusioned soul up a hill, encourage the light of revelation in their eyes.

She sits, thinks for a while, and then: "Come with me," she says.

"What? To Holland?"

"Sure, why not?"

"I don't know how that would work, Rachel. I'm retired. I've nothing to offer anyone."

"You're too young to be retired. You can teach."

"Teach what?"

"Metreology... or something."

"You mean metrology?"

"Whatever."

"I'm done, Rachel. Really."

Done.

"But you've got to get out, Rick. The future for Europeans like us is... well, you know? *In Europe*."

She has a point, and to a degree I am exiling myself – memories of those fine European cities I once knew, and those work-weeks in Paris. But still...

"I've got plans. I'll be sticking it out here, in old Blighty."

Did I actually just say: *old Blighty*?

"Plans?"

"I'm going to convert this place to run off photovoltaics, and a wind generator. Maybe swap the Beast for another EV, I think the current gen's a lot better than the last one I tried. And I'm going to walk. And write about walking. And I'm going to chronicle our slide into climate catastrophe, to say nothing of post Covid, post BREXIT economic Armageddon, and then one damned pandemic after the other. But without getting angry about it. As for why, well, I suppose someone's got to do it."

This is even more news to me, but it doesn't sound like such a bad plan.

She respects this, I think – if only because I've never been so blunt with her before. "Okay," she says, "but I'll send you my point of contact in case you change your mind. Now, are you coming to bed, or what?"

"Sure. I'll be right up. But, Rachel..."

"Hmm?"

"Just so you know, I am... saving myself... for someone."

She smiles at that. Broad smile.

"Good for you, Rick. Don't worry... just keep me warm tonight. Then drive me to Hull. Okay?"

Chapter Fifty Two

The Tints did not attempt Swirl How after all. It's early October when Al tells me this. By now the US president has contracted Covid, and affected a miracle recovery that defies science, and public opinion. As for the UK there are rumours of imminent draconian measures that would forbid my seeing Al, or Lottie, even at a distance, and in any setting, be it house, garden, park or hill. It's a possible return to the mad March days, and we seem to have got nowhere.

As for the Tints on Swirl How, the forecast turned poor, she tells me, and the group's ability was mixed. The chances of having to abort were high, which meant Baz would have wanted to press on regardless. So, she pulled rank, pulled the plug on it, and likely spared a mountain rescue call-out.

Now she calls me to enquire after my condition, and when I appear optimistic, she suggests a recon of Penyghent, Yorkshire Dales, and in a tone that implies she has more than just the walking on her mind. Plus we'd better get a move on, us living in Lancashire and rumours of the regions being separated into tiers of threat, when crossing borders, say into Yorkshire, would be forbidden.

I am to meet her at 10:00, on the car-park of the Golden Lion at Horton. I am thirty minutes early, on a fresh, sunny autumn morning, and I arrive to find her already tying on her boots. Another reason they did not go, she says, was she suddenly lacked the confidence of leadership, without me. They would wait until I was fit, if that was next year or the year after, but they would not be doing Swirl How, she told them, until she and I had had them over Penyghent first – Al on point, me as backstop, the pair of us linked by walkie-talkie. *Over.* And they would not be doing Penyghent, either until she and I had walked our customary recon, and ironed out any differences we might have.

Differences, Al?

Boots tied, she looks at me with water in her eyes, then throws me an unexpected hug. It takes my breath away, the warmth of it, the need in it.

"Don't think that's strictly allowed, Al. We're not bubbled or anything."

"Fuck that. I don't feel you resisting much."

It's true, I do not resist at all. Indeed I too am on the verge of tears, though seeing hers first may have precipitated matters. She lands a punch not too gently in the middle of my chest, then thumps me heartily on the back. "Good to see you, Rick. How's Lottie?"

Ah... bless you, Al.

"Oh... she's fine. Good to see you too, Al."

"All set then?"

"Yes. Set."

"Then let's go."

As we come out of carpark of the Golden Lion, the magnificent prow of Penyghent emerges from behind the church. It's years since I last climbed this hill and I sense in my bones I am not fit to be on it now, that indeed, I shall be lucky to see the top even of the Brackenbottom Scars, or maybe the hole in the wall that marks the foot of the mountain proper. The damage of Covid is still hindering me. On the upside, I am not infectious, and its aftermath allows me days in a row when I feel better than I've ever felt in my life, but then, on the downside, there are days when it robs me of the breath to tie my shoelaces. I am hoping today is not one of those days, because I do not want to let Al down.

The days are mixed now, sometimes warm, sometimes cold. Today feels cold, though the sky is open in patches to a deep late-season blue. There are falls of crisp copper in the lanes. The hill is dappled with fast moving shadow, giving the entire landscape a sense of movement. I am giddy as we approach, thinking I might wobble over and be dissolved into it, into the gaps between the atoms that are not atoms, into the space that is not space.

She wears her snood against the cold. Women have by now taken to face coverings well, experimenting with fashion and colour. The men are less content, some having adopted a sullen and at time comically rebellious approach, with disposable surgical-masks worn over their chins, or hanging from one ear. I also wear a snood over my face, and the trapper hat with a Soviet star that Baz recently gifted me, memento of his time in Germany. I mean nothing by the latter, other than a wry irony that only he and I would appreciate. I am a democratic-socialist, strictly of the cappuccino variety.

Call me a Commie bastard if you like, but really, the joke’s on you.

A steady half hour's pull places us on a craggy outcrop. A simple scramble shortens the way, which she tackles with ease. I follow, arrive atop of it breathless, sweating and dizzy, my eyesight whiting out.

"You're still not well are you?"

"Sorry Al, I'll be all right. Some days I struggle to warm up."

This is true, though some days I don't get going at all.

"Let's have lunch. You'll feel better."

"Okay. But it's just..."

"What?"

"I may not make the top, but... it's just good, *really good*, to be out on hill. With you."

"Oh yes?"

"You didn't mean it though did you? Back then when you said you'd lost confidence?"

"Covid's getting us all down, Rick. It's been six months already, and I reckon the way we're shaping up, this next wave could be even worse than the first. And we've had all spring and summer to get out, to pretend things are normal. So, it's going to be tough over winter. I'm feeling it a bit that's all."

"You'll be fine, Al. You're..."

"What? I'm what?"

"You're like an officer – British Army. You know?"

"No. And you wouldn't either."

"I mean you're confident. You believe in yourself. That's why we follow you. Some of that confidence rubs off on us too. We feel we can conquer anything when we're out with you – Swirl How, Penyghent - even Ben Nevis. Bring it on."

"Shut up, you moron." She's blushing, and I'm enjoying it. "But it's kind of you to say so."

"Actually, it was Baz who said it."

"Baz said that? About me. Really?"

"Really. And he was right."

It's a risk, mentioning Baz's name, but she doesn't seem to have taken against it this time, at least not yet. "He really said *that*?"

"He did."

"Big dick and a silver tongue. Dangerous combination."

"Yea, well. I've got neither, as you know, so you're safe with me."

"That's true. On both counts." And then: "I'm glad you're spending a bit of time with him. You're a good influence."

"Me? Not likely. Baz thinks I'm a pussy."

She laughs. "I hope not, or you really are in trouble. Likes his pussy, does Baz."

The Brackenbottom scars are still some distance away, white impacted molars of limestone, shining in the sun. The path crosses them, rises to meet the sky at the gap in the wall. The hill preens, beautiful – inviting, and forbidding at the same time.

There is by now a long snake of people on the trail. A group of corporate types come sweating up, hold a competition to see who can make the biggest noise about checking their emails. Then, when they're sure they've crowded us enough, they move on.

"Looks like it's going to be busy up there," she says.

"Three peaks route. Always did attract a lot of arseholes."

"Yes. Pity. Gorgeous hill though."

"Isn't it. Best in the Dales, I think."

"Oh, you do? Prefer the Warrendale Knots myself."

"I don't know them."

"Show you sometime. Not sitting too close am I?"

"No, you're fine. I'm not infectious."

"Me neither. NHS sent me a test. I'm in this trial. Not seen anyone else since I got the all clear. You'll not catch it from me."

"I've had one of those recently too. They sent it me after I'd paid for one."

"Ha! Always the way."

A cloud takes the light, plunges the hill into shade, then reveals it again.

"Rick?"

"Hmm?"

"I'm really sorry, you know?"

"What for?"

"That time... trying to get something going with you – sleeping with you and everything. But not really knowing what I wanted. Wanting all the benefits, but without the responsibilities."

"Oh, that."

"It wasn't right. Not fair, not respectful... of you. I should have just told Bazzer from the outset, told him, yes, me and Rick, we're giving it a go, seeing how things work out. But I didn't. Couldn't. My mistake."

"You didn't want a boyfriend, Al. It's fine. Who knows, a thing like that might have suited us both, but then this damned pandemic

got in the way. Changed everything."

"Well, we don't always mean what we say, or say what we mean, do we?"

"Water under the bridge. We're fine, you and me. We had some fun, nobody got hurt, or pregnant, and we're still mates."

"Yes... still mates. Just as well... I was a rubbish as a lover."

"Not rubbish... you were just a bit..."

"What? Out with it!"

"Well, a bit rough maybe... still got the scars."

"Oh..."

"No problem. It was a pleasure. Really."

"Dick."

We eat a little, drink a little water and I feel myself warming to the day, so we press on. An hour later I'm embracing the summit-cairn like a lover. The wind's a devil though, so we duck through the stile and squat in the lee of the wall, chink water bottles in celebration.

"Nice one Rick. Seems you're not dead yet."

"Seems not. But... shouldn't you be taking notes or something?"

"What for?"

"Route planning?"

"Don't be stupid, we both know this hill like the back our hands."

"I suppose. So?..."

"Just wanted to see you. Talk to you." She looks serious for a moment, then brightens: "How about you and Lottie? How's that going then? Slept with her yet? You must have by now. Tell me to shut up, but I'll just ignore you."

"I'm just not sure *where* it's going. Slept with her? No, that's a trip down a psychedelic rabbit hole for sure and I'm not sure we're up to it."

"I'd go for it. Still swimming naked?"

"All the time. And dancing. And she sends me these erotic pictures of herself."

"What? Let's have a look. No... only joking." Serious now. "What's holding you back?"

"Truth. Lottie lives by truth. Tells you straight if you ask her. Expects the same thing from you. All the time. One lie, even a white lie, and you're out."

"So ask her."

"Ask her what?"

"Do you want me to sleep with you." She stands then, takes in the view, breathes deep of the air. "God, this is magnificent isn't it? Do you think we'll even get back to the days when we can just come and go up places like this again?"

"I don't know Al. I hope so."

"Truth, Rick."

"Truth Al?"

She reaches out her hand, reaches down to me. I take it and she pulls me to my feet. A firm grip, manly. "Be my partner?"

"You're proposing to me?"

"Damned right, I am. There'll be hell to pay though."

"You reckon?"

Promoting you to assistant walk leader without going through the committee. It's a bit unconstitutional."

"Well, the times are becoming more authoritarian, Al. We should perhaps just move with them."

Her eyes are watering again. It's just the wind. Mine are doing it too.

Chapter Fifty Three

Lottie greets me as I step down from the Beast and she hugs me, pleased to see I am mostly recovered. True, I am still not fully myself, times even now, early November, when it feels as if the bug has drained my blood, replaced it with water. The weather has not helped. For weeks, the light has been flat and the world has lacked all depth, and then we have lost what bit of light there is by tea-time. Winter drawing in.

But for now, it's a Friday evening, and the twinkle lights in Lottie's garden are pretty in this creeping dusk. It's cool out, and the sky is heavy with cloud, rising for a good downpour. The second wave of infection is surging, and Lancashire is in the highest tier, meaning Lottie and I are bound now in a bubble, unable to see anyone else until we are through the other side of the pandemic. The thought of it excites me – the dance, the quiet, the sanctuary. But first, there is something I must do, something I must open with.

We are sitting at a table in the garden-room, and I'm feeling like a millionaire opposite her, looking like Bogart, actually – white Tux, shiny shoes, made for dancing. She's wearing a silvery, floaty dress – a dress made for dancing – and a cashmere wrap around her shoulders. There is a candle, and the sense of a special occasion. It feels like we have not seen each other for months.

I would like to have known her as a younger woman, though I understand that would not have been to know the best of her, tortured as she was, and drunk for most of it. Once this is over, if it is ever over, we shall find good hotels and dinner-dances, and I shall treat her like a queen.

"Where do you find your life's meaning in all of this, Lottie?"

She shrugs, smiles, gives a little shake of the head. The question is a stupid one, so there is no need for a serious answer. I apologise for it, then take out the device on which I carry the photographs she sent me, flash up the first of them, and I show it to her, then swipe through them slowly. She responds to each with an inscrutable flick of the eyebrow.

I will neither defuse nor explain it for you, Rick. You must risk it.

"Okay. Lottie... I have some truths I must share with you."

Her eyes pop in mock surprise, and I would be discouraged by that, except her smile draws me in. "I've slept with Al."

She nods, shrugs. She already knows this, though how she knows it, I don't know. But her opinion on the subject is: *so what?*

"We don't... do that any more. But we're partners still in a sense, partners on the hill. I'll be walking with her, enjoying having her boss me around as her deputy in the Tints. She's my friend, Lottie. A dear friend."

To this I receive a raised eyebrow, a nod... *up to you Rick... you must do what you think is best.*

Deep breath. "And... I recently slept with an old flame... I mean some weeks ago."

She does draw back a little at that, eyes narrowing, waiting for the but...

"She's... abroad now. Escaped actually. Quite the political radical is Rachel, and thank god for those like her. But she's safe now, which is what I want. I'm not planning on us meeting again, but in case we do, I'll make sure there's a spare room at my house... you know?"

She gives me the lopsided smile, then the nod, eyebrow raised. And your point Rick?

A sort of clearing of the decks, Lottie?

She rises, puts a Tango on the player, shimmies her hips and holds out her hands in invitation. Then we dance. I have not imagined it – time with Lottie never fails to transform, to clarify the muddy waters. I always leave here calmer, floating.

It's a dance of seduction, the Tango, and a statement plain enough, if I am reading her correctly. You feel the Tango in your bones. It demands expression, is erotic, powerful. Anything else would be a deceit. I accept the challenge of it.

In the story of the dance, the woman resists until the man proves himself. So it is, Lottie's resistance is in the tilt of her chin, the turn of her nose, the slant of her shoulder. We twist and turn, change direction with a sudden jerk, all times by instinct, by feel, by the sense of how far she will permit the movement. The movement loosens her hair... it comes adrift, descends... she lets it go.

I am driven by an intoxication, by her heat, by the scent of her. By degrees though, her message comes through, with a look and a feel that says if I want it I can have it, but must risk the consequences.

Even though I do not know what they are.

We pause for coffee, watch the rain a while. Between the rain

and us, there falls our reflection in the glass. She looks at me and blows away the hair from her eyes, smiles, always the smile, but also, I suspect observing and bemused by my discomfort, something cheeky and playful about her. We are both a little breathless. Me more so. She takes up my device which I left lying on the table, and dials up a note-pad app, so she can "talk" to me. But her words will be measured, precise, and true.

While she taps, I watch her, the straightness of her back, the faint narrowing of her eyes, and the poise of her hands. All the troubles she has known, and yet a return to such dignity. I want to be more like that.

She slides the device across: "Ask yourself: can you bear to have me in your space?"

"Yes, of course, Lottie. But more than that – it would be the finest thing. Also to know that's where you wanted to be."

She settles her hand upon the back of mine, presses it, winks her reassurances, beckons me once more... but this time, not to dance...

Ends